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APRIL 1994

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LEWIN

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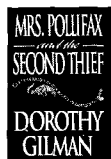
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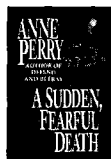
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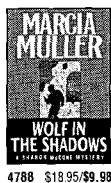
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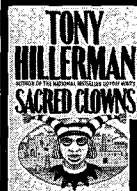
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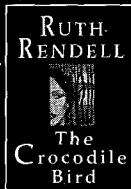
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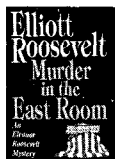
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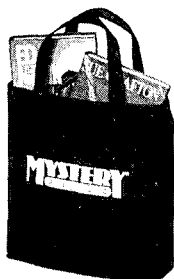
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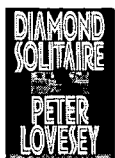
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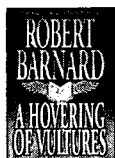


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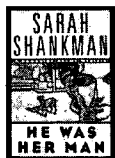
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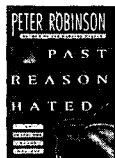
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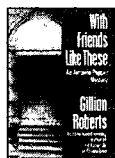
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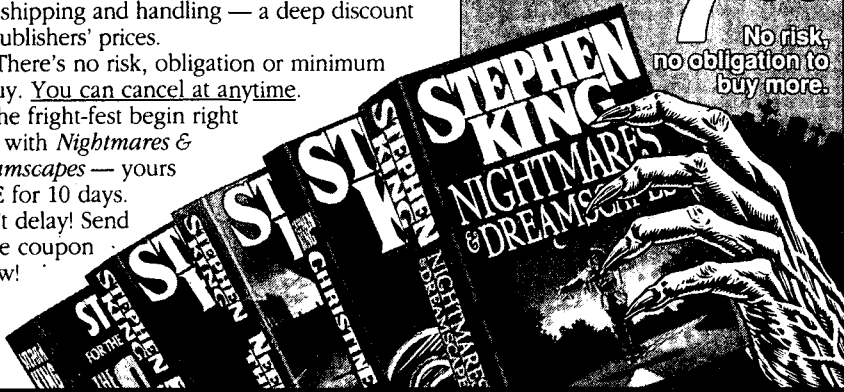
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# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**W**e promised a while back to give you information about the next Bouchercon, the annual convention of mystery readers, writers, editors, et al. The convention takes place in October and this is only February (maybe March), but it's a good idea to make reservations early.

So, for those who think they might want to attend . . .

Bouchercon XXV will be held in Seattle from October 6th to 9th, 1994, at the Stouffer Madison Hotel. Until June 15th, membership in the convention will be \$75 (more thereafter). Membership orders or requests for more information should be sent to:

Bouchercon 25 Seattle  
P.O. Box 75684  
Seattle, WA 98125-0684

The Stouffer Madison Hotel is near the Pike Place Market and Pioneer Square.

Guest of Honor at this Silver Anniversary convention will be Marcia Muller, author of the popular Sharon McCone mysteries among others.

Toastmaster of the convention will be George C. Chesbro, whose mystery novels star the dwarf criminologist Mongo.

Art Scott will be Fan Guest of Honor.

As always, you can expect to find a dealers' room full of new and used mysteries, and a special exhibit is planned of early mystery novels, magazines, and memorabilia.

And there will, of course, be panel discussions, book signings, awards presentations, and a Saturday night banquet, among other events.

**Cathleen Jordan**, Editor; **Susan A. Teitz**, Editorial Assistant; **Jean Traina**, Design Director; **Terri Czczko**, Art Director; **Anthony Bari**, Junior Designer; **Marilyn Roberts**, Senior Production Manager; **Carole Dixon**, Production Manager; **Cynthia Manson**, Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Constance Scarborough**, Contracts Manager; **Barbara Parrott**, Director of Newsstand Circulation; **Bruce Schwartz**, Director of Circulation, Subscription Sales; **Dennis Jones**, Operations Manager, Subscription Sales; **Leslie Guarnieri**, Renewal and Billing Manager, Subscription Sales; **Fred Sabloff**, Associate Publisher; **Judy Dorman**, Advertising Sales Manager. **Advertising Offices, New York:** (212) 856-6306. **Advertising Representative:** Dresner Direct, Inc., New York, New York, (212) 889-1078.

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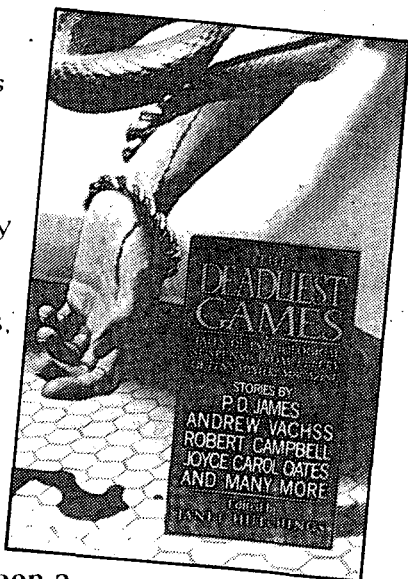
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FICTION

# Travel Plans

by Michael Z. Lewin



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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““S low, Sal,” Angelo said as he wound spaghetti onto his fork. “Slow, slow, slow.”

Salvatore Lunghi looked suitably grave and decided to shelve his good news. “That’s too bad, bro,” he said.

“Bro? What’s this ‘bro’?” The Old Man had suffered from dyspepsia all winter. “In my day a man spoke the Queen’s English at his father’s table and was proud to use it.”

But Gina had seen something flicker across her bro-in-law’s face. She said, “How about you, Sally? Anything new?”

“You know,” Salvatore said.

Gina was not made of the stuff one fobs off. “Are you seeing somebody?”

“Not especially,” Salvatore said.

Gina studied him and persisted. “So what *is* it?”

Salvatore, never good at delaying gratification, grinned.

Mama perked up. Angelo’s marriage to Gina was a long-standing success. And Rosetta was at least engaged, even if the engagement was in its fifth year and her Walter was somewhat married. But Salvatore . . . a mother despairs. “Don’t tell me. At last!” she said.

“No, no, Mama. Nothing like that,” Salvatore said.

“So like what?” Mama said.

“I’ve got an exhibition.” Salvatore was a painter.

Mama’s disappointment was silent, but Gina said, “That’s *wonderful*. When is it? Where is it?”

“I open in June. It’s a gallery called The Academy. Do you know it?”

“No,” Gina said. Everyone looked around the table. Nobody knew The Academy. “So what street is it in?”

Salvatore grinned again. “It’s not in a street,” he said.

“He’s up to something,” the Old Man said. He rubbed his stomach.

But everybody understood already that Salvatore was throwing down a deductive challenge to the family.

Gina said, “So, it’s not in a street. Where else could it be?”

The thoughtful pause was broken by David, Gina and Angelo’s younger child. “I know,” David said. “Uncle Sal is going to sell his pictures on the pavement, like a busker.”

This speculation was considered least amusing by the oldest members of the family.

“No,” Salvatore said. “Strictly indoors.”

"But not in a street," Gina said. "What else have we got? A road?"

"No."

"A lane?"

"A mews?"

"A close?"

"A crescent? Is it a crescent?"

But it was none of these, offered from various positions around the table.

Then Angelo said, "A passage." There were galleries in a number of the city's tourist-targeted passageways.

Instead of saying a simple, "No," Salvatore said, "Good try. Warm."

"Warm," Gina repeated. "Does this mean that your gallery is not accessible to motor vehicles?"

"It does."

"Mmmm," the Old Man grumbled.

Angelo said, "How about in one of the buildings at the edge of the Minster's forecourt?"

"Forecourt, he calls it," the Old Man said.

But Salvatore's grin broadened. "Spot on, bro."

"Wow," David said. "They get the best buskers in front of the Minster."

"That's wonderful, Sally," Gina said.

"That's in the middle of town?" Mama asked, for confirmation.

"The middle of the middle," Salvatore said. "A mate of mine bought what was a souvenir shop, and he's turning it into three floors of paintings. Including a generous and reasonably-priced selection of beautiful works by yours truly, June to September."

"But that's tourist season," Mama said.

"Oh, is it?" Salvatore asked, winking at Gina.

"Yes," Mama said slowly, thinking it through. "But do you have enough of your paintings in stock, if suddenly they are going to sell?"

"Paintings you call them," the Old Man said. These days he had kinds words only for Marie, his granddaughter. But Marie was out with a girlfriend agonizing about her boyfriend Brian. At Sunday dinnertime!

"I plan to do exactly that," Salvatore said.

"Good," Mama said. "Very good." Because for Salvatore to paint meant that he would hire models, meet women.

"There's no pleasing you," the Old Man said to his wife. "When he brings one home, she isn't good enough. When he doesn't, you want him to find another." The Old Man beseeched the skies for relief.

"One day my Salvatore will find the right woman," Mama said. "When it happens, he'll know. He'll know."

Salvatore said, "I was hoping there would be a little work you could put my way. I need money to buy paints and canvases."

"When he needs money, the agency is good enough for him," the Old Man said.

"Hush," Mama said.

Angelo said, "Business is so slow."

"It's true," Gina said. "I can't remember it this bad all the time I've known Angelo. Even the legal work has tailed off."

"Ah well," Salvatore said philosophically.

Then David said, "I put a case your way, Dad."

Everyone looked at David. "Not funny," Angelo said to his thirteen-year-old son.

"It's no joke. Do you know Ben Smith?"

"No."

"He's in my maths class. His family went on holiday over Christmas, and while they were away, his house was robbed. They had pearls and silver and all stuff like that. Well, on Friday he was talking about how his dad said the police were useless and how some of the most expensive things weren't insured. So I told him my parents were private eyes and that he should tell his parents our family was a hundred times better detectives than the police."

"Pearls and silver," the Old Man said. "They sound like payers."

**T**o Gina and Angelo's great astonishment, Ben Smith's parents did come to the office on Monday afternoon. Moreover, the Smiths hired the Lunghis to investigate the burglary.

When she heard about it at dinner, Marie threw up her hands. "You are going to be insufferable!" she said to David. "In-bloody-sufferable."

"Marie!" her mother said.

"I'm sorry," Marie said, "but he's bad enough at the best of times. All la-di-da because he thinks being good at maths and computers is so important when at the same time he has no more personality than a single-celled organism."

"Schoolwork is important," Angelo said.

"Amoeba, amoeba, amoeba," Marie sang in her brother's ear.

But David's excited mood could not be quenched. "You're just pissed off because Brian is taking Ellen to the cinema tonight," he taunted.

"As a matter of fact," Marie said, "I told him to."

"Children . . ." Gina said.

"That statement would have more evidentiary credibility if you'd said it *before* he asked her out."

"So how are you getting along with the lovely *Lisa* these days?" Marie said cruelly. "Shared any good floppy disks lately?"

"None of your business."

"Freaky, battery-powered, Miss Personality *Lisa*!"

"Children, that's enough!" Gina said. The siblings resorted to girning, but at least they were silent.

"So tell about the Smiths," Rosetta said. Angelo and Salvatore's only sister, Rosetta was the family business's accountant, part-time.

Gina said, "Mrs. Smith said that it wasn't the value of the missing property that mattered most. They were family heirlooms, and it was the sentimental loss that counted."

"He was sentimental about the money," Angelo said.

"But they were both furious that it happened despite the precautions they'd taken," Gina said.

"How long were they away?" Rosetta asked.

"Two weeks," Angelo said, "skiing in Switzerland."

"Oh lovely," Rosetta said, her own ambitions for such things having increased following the success of a recent weekend away with Walter.

"They followed all the advice in a police leaflet. They stopped the milk and the papers and the post," Angelo said.

"And left a key with a neighbor who looked in every day."

"And they bought gadgets to turn lights and radios on automatically in the night, like there were a dozen insomniacs in the house."

"But they were robbed anyway," Gina said. "We called Charlie and he's checking the files, but he wasn't aware of anything special about the police investigation. All he said was that it wasn't a typical target for a burglary."

"Neighbors close by," Angelo said. "Well lit. Neighborhood Watch."

"The opportunistic thefts happen in dark places, or where the house is isolated."



"So does Charlie think it was organized rather than opportunistic?" Rosetta asked. "Or maybe somebody who knew they were away? Who knew they were away?"

"No one apart from close friends and family," Gina said. "No one who could possibly be involved. They were very positive about that."

But it was about the matter of who knew the Smiths were away from home that Angelo made his first inquiries. Tuesday morning he called at the Owl and the Pussycat, the travel agents with whom the Smiths had booked their holiday. He spoke to the manager in her office.

"I have complete faith in my staff," Nora Henryson said. "We give the best and most personal service in the city. We make every effort to get the right holiday for every customer. And I know my people well. There's not one I wouldn't trust with my own cash."

"It's not that I think any of your employees moonlights as a burglar," Angelo said, "but they *do* handle information that burglars could make use of."

"As a matter of fact," the manager said, "my boyfriend happens to know about these things. He's told me all sorts of stories about how devious burglars can be, and because of that my staff helps our clients to take all possible precautions. Even so, it can happen to anyone, you know. Even policemen get burgled."

"Do you have the impression that there's been an increase in burglaries while people are on holiday?"

Ms. Henryson considered. "As a matter of fact I *have* heard of quite a few recently."

However, when Angelo returned to the office, Gina reported that Charlie, their police contact, had quite a different impression. "Charlie says the local police have concentrated on fighting burglaries this year. It's been a point of pride that we've done better here than anywhere comparable in the country."

"Interesting," Angelo said.

"Charlie also said that there was nothing unusual about the Smith burglary except that everything taken was small. Portable. And that some of the valuable things were well hidden. The Smiths didn't have a safe, but some jewelry was kept in a hollow bedpost. Even so, the burglars found it."

"What do you mean, portable?"

"There were valuable items of furniture that weren't touched."

"What did Charlie make of that?"

"He thought maybe the thieves parked some distance away. Maybe too far not to be conspicuous carrying a Sheraton table."

"Or maybe they just didn't know a valuable table from an MFI one."

"Maybe," Gina said.

"I think next I'd better have a look at the Smiths' house and the neighborhood," Angelo said.

"It's in hand," Gina said.

"It is?"

"After I talked to Charlie, I rang Salvatore."

Salvatore reported what he learned at dinner. "The house," he said. "Anybody who found the hollow bedpost either knew it was there or went over the place with a fine-tooth comb."

"Who knows about bedposts?" the Old Man asked. "Who does this woman invite to her bedroom?"

Salvatore said, "They don't think anybody knew."

"So it's the comb," the Old Man said. He turned to his plate. "Curry, I get? What's so hard about making lasagne?"

"Curry comb," David said. Marie stuck out her tongue at her brother. Neither contribution drew response.

"A search so thorough as to try bedposts takes time," Salvatore said.

"So we have a burglar with a lot of time," Angelo said. "Mmmm. What else, Sal?"

Salvatore described his exploration of the Smiths' neighborhood. "I don't go for this parking problem idea," he said. "There's an alleyway behind the house, and everybody has garages anyway. There would be plenty of places to park inconspicuously, close enough to carry out furniture at night if they wanted to."

"So they didn't want to," Angelo said. "Why wouldn't they want to?"

"The table you mentioned," Salvatore said. "It's worth at least five thousand itself."

"Maybe they didn't know the value," Gina said.

"Or they don't have anybody to sell tables to," Salvatore said. "What did Charlie say about recovery of the jewelry?"

"Nothing has turned up in the month since the burglary. All the usual outlets have been checked."

"So," Angelo said, "maybe our burglars have fences outside the area."

"Which suggests organization, bigtime," Rosetta said.

"Yet they don't take a valuable table," Gina said.

"There were other good pieces, too," Salvatore said. "Chairs and some so-so pictures. It could all have been carried."

"They had time to look," Gina said.

"Yet such things were left," Angelo said. "And that suggests no organization, smalltime and local. Mmmm."

Then Angelo recounted his meeting with the travel agency manager. This led to a number of questions, and Angelo decided to return to talk to Nora Henryson again the next day.

**O**n Wednesday morning, however, the first thing Gina did was to ring Charlie. She asked him to find out from the officers in the antiburglary campaign whether there had been an increase in the proportion of the city's burglaries that had occurred while property occupants were away on holiday.

Charlie returned the call before lunch. The police were adamant. Burglaries of all kinds were down in the city.

Armed with this information, Angelo returned to the Owl and the Pussycat. Ms. Henryson seemed surprised to see him, but again she took Angelo to her office and this time offered him a drink.

Angelo declined.

"So what brings you back to us so soon, Mr. Lunghi?"

"Your boyfriend," Angelo said.

"Steve? What about him?"

"It's a matter of putting a few facts together. You said yesterday that you'd heard of an unusual number of holiday burglaries. That's burglaries of your clients, I presume."

"Yes," she said thoughtfully, "I suppose that's right."

"Well, I checked with the police, and they say that burglaries are down in the city. Not up." Ms. Henryson was about to speak, but Angelo held up a hand. She shrugged. Angelo said, "And you trust your staff completely."

"Yes, I do."

"Yet you also said that your boyfriend has special knowledge about burglaries. What I need to know, Ms. Henryson, is more about your boyfriend. How he's gained his knowledge, and whether it might be he, in fact, who is somehow connected to the incidents we're talking about."

"Steve can be extremely awkward, as I am only just beginning to realize, but you can't be suggesting that he might—"

"The connection could be unwitting. I'm not accusing him of anything. But I really do need to know more about him."

"This is ridiculous," Ms. Henryson said, but just at that moment her telephone rang. "Excuse me."

"Of course."

She answered and said, "I'm busy now. Who? Oh. Yes. Send him in."

Angelo was puzzled, but in a moment there was a knock on the door.

Ms. Henryson said, "Come in."

The door was opened by a large man in a rumpled suit and with a tie loose at the collar. "Nora?" he said. "I got to work this morning and the first thing I hear about is the Owl and the Pussycat. Somebody's got the bright idea to go back to some of our victims and see if they got their tickets from you. What's this all about?"

"Steve, let me introduce Mr. Lunghi. Mr. Lunghi, this is Steve Nelson. He is a police sergeant assigned to the city's antiburglary task force."

"I was so embarrassed," Angelo said. "Are you going to have that teacake?" Gina passed the plate, and Angelo took the last toasted teacake. "I'm all but accusing this guy of accessory, and he turns out to be someone Charlie is getting his information from."

"So," Gina said equably, "if it isn't him, it must be someone else."

"You think?"

"Charlie rang while you were out. Five of the seven holiday-burglaries in January were of people who booked with the Owl and the Pussycat."

By Thursday morning Charlie telephoned the further news that the police had belatedly established common factors in the way the five Owl and the Pussycat burglaries had been committed. In particular, at each house only small items had been stolen, and the thieves seemed to have plenty of time. The police were reopening the five investigations as a group. The suggestion, therefore, was that the Lunghis should suspend their own work so as not to interfere with the police operation.

But Gina and Angelo had hardly put the phone down, and certainly had not had time to think through what they would do,



when there were footsteps on the stairs to the agency office.

A moment later Sergeant Steve Nelson entered.

"You don't have to tell us," Angelo began. "We know that you are reopening the cases."

"What I came around for," Nelson said, "was to apologize for yesterday. I was a little steamed. I didn't know what was going on. But I've gone through it all at work now. I understand that you were hired by the Smiths."

"Will you have a cup of tea, sergeant?" Gina said.

"Thank you," Nelson said. "I will."

Over tea the Lunghis learned that Nelson had only been with the new burglary task-force for two months. They also found that he had known Nora Henryson for less than a year. "She's made that travel agency into the best independent in the city," Nelson said. "I doubt any mere man could come first in her life, but I have hopes. I'm crazy about her, I really am."

It was Nelson's enthusiasm for Ms. Henryson and his related frustration that was the focus of conversation at the family dinner Thursday night.

"A man in love," Mama said. "A man who has found the right woman and knows it," she continued, looking at Salvatore. "Such a man would do almost anything to win his mate."

"And lose the rest of his life," the Old Man said sourly.

"Do you think the policeman is responsible?" Rosetta said.

"Someone must have given these criminals their information," Mama said. "Maybe if he undermines her business a little, she'll begin to depend on him more. Love knows no rules. As you already know, my little one."

Rosetta blushed.

"So we're agreed," Angelo said. "The burglars received information about who was away from home and for how long. That's how they knew they were safe in the house and could spend a long time looking for hidden money and valuables."

Though no money had been taken from the Smiths, small amounts were lost in others of the five burglaries, and in one house nearly a hundred pounds in twenty pence coins had been taken from what looked like bags of flour in the pantry.

"But why only very small things?" Gina said. "Some of the paintings they left were easy enough to carry."

"Paintings!" the Old Man snorted. "Don't tell me paintings."

Salvatore said nothing in response to this, any more than he had responded to his mother's musings on love. Indeed, everyone paused to think.

David broke the silence by saying, "It doesn't have to be someone giving."

"What are you talking about?" Angelo asked.

Marie made circular motions with her index finger, pointed at David's head. Screwy. Crazy.

"Go on, David," Gina said. "Don't mind your sister."

"It doesn't have to be that someone gave the information about the travel agent customers to the burglars."

"How else did the burglars know where to go, stupid?" Marie said.

"I mean it could be that someone took it. Not an employee or a boyfriend. Someone from the outside."

"I'm beginning to think these visits are more than just business," Ms. Henryson said. "Not that I'm complaining. Are you sure you won't have a coffee?"

"No, thank you," Angelo said.

"So, you wanted to see me?"

"On business, I assure you," Angelo said.

"Oh dear," Ms. Henryson sighed. "The signals men give can be so confusing."

"I always thought it was women who were confusing," Angelo said with a smile.

"You think? Well, I can't make men out at all."

"Is that Sergeant Nelson in particular?"

"It certainly is," she said. "All I do is make a little joke about commitment and he practically breaks down my door to get married. But I don't want to marry. I like Steve, but I've got a life without him. I've got a lovely house of my own. A business. I'm perfectly happy with things the way they are."

"Sounds ideal to me," Angelo said.

"Not to Steve Nelson," Ms. Henryson said. "Men!"

Angelo waited a respectful moment before he said, "It was rather about the breaking down of your door that I've come."

The door, however, drew a blank. Nevertheless, when Angelo returned to the agency office a few minutes after eleven, he strode positively. He found Salvatore with Gina, and tea in the pot.

"Hit me," he said. "I've worked it out."

Gina poured him a cup of tea and then offered the brothers biscuits.

"Got any chocolate ones?" Salvatore asked.

"Cheeky," Gina said.

But Angelo said, "When there's no milk chocolate, it doesn't mean there's no plain."

"This business slump's getting to him," Salvatore said.

Angelo said, "Nobody burgled the travel agency."

Gina frowned. It had been the family's working hypothesis that the burglars broke into the Owl and the Pussycat and stole information about customers' holidays.

"But," Angelo said, "it came to me as I was leaving."

"What did?"

"Travel agents book tickets by computer. The computers are connected to airline and holiday companies by telephone links. Nobody broke into the shop, but someone broke into the shop computer."

"I see," Gina said.

"I had Nora Henryson go through it for me. All the basic travel information is there. And the best part is that the Owl and the Pussycat prides itself on personal service. You call up a customer's name and you even get personal details the agent has found out in chatting. And they make a particular point of asking whether the house will be left unoccupied *because* they have special leaflets prepared by the police antiburglary task force."

Gina said, "So all we have to work out is who broke into the computer."

David, who was on a roll, cracked it at dinner. "Kids," he said.

"What?" Angelo said.

"Kids. Kids are the ones who know about computers. At school they even talk about how to hack into them."

"Such an ugly word, 'hack,'" Rosetta said, but she was in a bad mood because Walter had canceled the cinema.

"Kids kids kids!" Angelo said. "All they could carry would be small things. Yes, yes, yes," Angelo said.

David was particularly sorry that Marie was not there to envy his triumph. Though on Friday evenings dinner was held early to facilitate family members' going out, Marie had gone out even earlier. Brian had rung. They were making up.

Then Rosetta asked, "If it's kids, why have none of the stolen goods turned up? You're not suggesting that these children have fences outside the city, are you?"

"I suppose not," Angelo said.

"So where are Mrs. Smith's pearls and the other valuables?"

"I don't know," Angelo said.

David said, "Maybe they don't know how."

"How what?" Gina said.

"Suppose it's kids. My age or maybe older. They might know how to hack into a computer, and they might be able to sneak out of their houses to do the robberies. But would they know how to sell stolen things without getting caught? I wouldn't."

"I should think not," Rosetta said.

"What would they do with the things they stole, then?" Gina asked. "What do you think?"

"Give things away at school?" David suggested. "To girls they want to impress, if they're immature."

As a special treat, and because it was a Saturday, Angelo took David with him to the police station. They asked for Sergeant Nelson at the desk and thought they were lucky when told he was on duty.

They were less certain of their good fortune when Nelson came to meet them. The man looked awful, tired and unkempt. He also behaved gruffly, saying, "Not more about the Owl and the Pussycat and flaming Nora Henryson, I hope."

Angelo was surprised. "I thought you and Ms. Henryson were close."

"Women are supposed to want commitment, right? So you offer them commitment. But no. That's not good enough. That won't do. Suddenly they want to keep their freedom instead. Women!"

"Have you two broken up?"

"After a lengthy discussion, I decided to reconsider my position," Nelson said. "And I started reconsidering it with some mates at the Star last night, and I shall renew deliberations again tonight at the Hat and Feather."

"Oh."

"So. What did you want, Mr. Lunghi?"

"We've come to solve your case for you," David said.

"What?"



"Nothing," Angelo said. "We just wondered if there had been any progress on solving the case."

"Progress!" Nelson said. "Give us a chance! We only just reopened it."

"Dad, I thought—"

"In that case we'll be on our way," Angelo said. "Sorry to have bothered you. And good luck."

As they left, Sergeant Nelson stood watching them, scratching his unshaved chin.

David's chin too was unshaved, though considerably smoother than Nelson's. David, however, was just as puzzled. Even so, he knew to wait until his father was ready to explain.

Back in the car Angelo said, "He was too sour to work with Ms. Henryson. We'll handle it differently, that's all."

David was the only Lunghi who expected that anything would happen that night, but when you're on a roll, you're on a roll. For David the case *had* to break immediately because the five nights after Saturday were school nights and he would hardly be allowed to go on a stakeout on a school night.

Sure enough, Salvatore, from his position at the Owl and the Pussycat, rang through that an illicit call had been made to the travel agency's computer. That news sent the family to action stations, bar Rosetta, who was already committed for the evening—deliriously and to everyone's relief—with Walter.

Marie and the equally rehabilitated Brian agreed to stay by the phone at home, where Mama was assigned to keep a discreet eye on them.

Like David, the Old Man was allowed to take part in the stakeout. He was in such a foul mood, maybe a little action would cheer him up. Even alone in his car, what trouble could he get into with kids? Angelo too drove alone. David went with Gina in Rosetta's car.

It seemed hardly credible that the hacker-burglars would go the same night to the address that had been freshly planted in the Owl and the Pussycat computer. But at two fifteen Gina interrupted a walkie-talkie game of *In My Grandma's Suitcase* to say, "There are two cyclists coming down the street. Over."

"Cyclists," Angelo said. "Do you mean motorbikes? Over."

"Push bikes," Gina said.

"I see them," the Old Man said. "Over. And you forgot to say 'over' last time, Gina. Over."

"Over," Gina said.

"How big are they, these cyclists? Over," Angelo said.

"Small," Gina said.

"Say 'over,'" the Old Man said. "That's how it's done. Over."

"Over," Gina said.

"Girls!" the Old Man said.

"I am *not* a girl," Gina said. "And if you call me one, you'll be over and out. Over."

"Not you," the Old Man said. "Them. The bikes are girls' bikes. Both the riders are girls."

"He didn't say 'over,'" David whispered to his mother.

Gina shook her head. "The cyclists are female, confirmed. Over," she said.

"Well well well," Angelo said. "Over."

Suddenly David was agitated. "Mum!" he said. He pulled at Gina's sleeve.

"What is it?" Gina said.

"I know one of them."

"Who?"

"One of the girls. It's Lisa!"

"Go on," Mama said, beaming. "What happened then?"

"The last thing in the world I expected," Salvatore said, "was to have to subdue two thirteen-year-old girls as they climbed through a smashed-out window frame. Especially when we left the windows unlocked on purpose, so they wouldn't have to break them. Didn't we, Nora?"

"We certainly did," Nora Henryson said, returning Salvatore's broad and friendly smile.

"Have some more fettucine, my dear," Mama said.

"It is very good," Nora said.

"Little ribbons," the Old Man said.

"Excuse me?"

"In Italian. That's what fettucine means. Little ribbons. Little slices."

"Oh."

"Good for you," the Old Man added.

"I'm sure," Nora said.

"So go on," Mama said. "You'd been waiting in this lovely, successful young woman's own house for how long?"

"All evening, Mama," Salvatore said.

"And at two thirty in the morning these burglar girls break a window."

"And climb in."

"And one of them is Lisa," Marie singsonged. "Little David's nerdy computer-mad ex-true-true-true love."

"Shut up!" David said. It should have been a triumphal Sunday lunch for him, but he was agitated, twitchy, lorn, and without wit.

Marie giggled happily.

"And you know the rest," Angelo said. "What they stole had to be small enough to be carried on bikes. And the police recovered everything from the girls' rooms at their homes."

"Except for the money," the Old Man said.

"Except for the money," Gina agreed. "And so tomorrow we'll be able to let the Smiths know that they can have their family heirlooms back, once the police are done with them."

"That's wonderful," Nora said. "You've done such brilliant work."

"You know," Mama said, "my Salvatore is a painter really. A very successful painter with an exhibition this summer near the Minster."

"Yes, I know, Mrs. Lunghi," Nora said.

"Mama, Nora has agreed to model for me if she can find the time," Salvatore said.

"One time," the Old Man said.

"Excuse me?" Nora said.

"Just the one time did I ever get hired to solve a murder. Norman Stiles was the victim. Did you ever hear about that? It was in all the papers."

Angelo and Gina traded glances. David and Marie weren't listening. Nora said, "I don't think I saw that, Mr. Lunghi. What happened?"

"I don't know," the Old Man said unexpectedly. "They've all heard it before, these." He waved a hand, indicating the family.

But Mama, experiencing a satisfaction with life she had not felt for months, said, "Go on. You tell the nice young woman about Norman Stiles, Papa. You tell her all about it."



# The

# ICE CAVE

*by Ashley Curtis*

**K**ate and Lella were a bit nervous about going down, but Scott assured them that it wasn't dangerous at all. Lella looked cautiously around her: the forest of tall pines was enchanting, spacious, softly swept with pine needles. The sun was squinting between the top branches of the trees, and the strange moss-covered rocks and boulders that jutted out of the ground made her think of dwarves and trolls. She didn't know if she wanted to leave this beautiful world of daylight and go into the dark underground. She was only twelve years old and thought that twelve years old was too young to die, and she associ-

ated death, somehow, with the awful but enticing hole that they were standing next to.

It was about a yard wide and a yard long, and she probably never would have noticed it if Scott hadn't been there to point it out. Once she noticed it, though, it was very strange. It went straight down into darkness, a deep shaft, and she could see rectangular metal rungs protruding from one of its rocky walls.

"It's so dark," she said.

"It's not so dark when you get down. It's like a big split in the ground and light gets through. It's really beautiful, like a cathedral."



She could tell that Scott was repeating something that he'd heard from someone else, because she knew he couldn't ever have been in a real cathedral, and she wasn't even sure herself what a cathedral was.

Scott was two years older than they were. He had thick lips and a few little hairs on his chin, and Kate was going out with him, but Lella didn't like him much. She didn't trust him, either, so she was very glad she wasn't Kate and didn't have to kiss him all the time. Kate would toss back her golden bangs before she kissed him, and then close her eyes; but Lella could tell she didn't really enjoy it.

"It's not even the ice cave," Scott went on. "It's just the entrance. You just go down these steps and then you're on the ground again, and we'll stop when we get to the real cave 'cause I know where it is."

"Come on," Kate said. Her eyes were an alarming blue against the smooth, lightly tanned skin of her face. "Let's do it."

Lella shrugged.

"Okay," she said, looking around melodramatically at the trees and pine needles and sunlight, hoping it wouldn't be for the last time.

Scott grinned. They had waited for him near the Ad-

amses' house, and he had come down through the woods, twenty minutes late, to meet them there and take them to the cave. Now he pulled a flashlight out of the pocket of his windbreaker and turned it on. He started climbing down the rungs, and Kate went after him. When she called out, Lella started climbing down herself.

It really wasn't very scary. There were only about eight rungs, and then they were standing on level, muddy ground. There was a dark passage to go along, but they had the flashlight, and then they were out in daylight again, walking along the bottom of a huge crevasse in the earth. The ground they walked on was only about a yard and a half wide; on either side, walls of mossy rock rose almost vertically towards the sky. Then the path started going down, and pretty soon the walls were thirty or forty yards high; and to look up and see the surface of the earth way up there, and the trees shooting way up even over that, made Lella feel exhilarated and confused.

They walked for two or three minutes, going down deeper and deeper but always with a line of sky above their heads. Then the mucky path leveled out and the walls above them closed together, and Scott had

to turn the flashlight on again. They were deep under the earth. The air was moist and cold.

Soon the ceiling above them was only just higher than their heads, and then the muck stopped and a little barrier of rock stood before them. Scott climbed over it and into a small niche. It was dark in the niche, and the rock all around them was sweaty and cold, and ahead of them they saw a metal bar and beyond it a deep hole, so deep you couldn't see down to the bottom even with the flashlight.

"That's it," Scott said. Then he said, "Look!"

On the other side of the bar, on the dark, wet wall of the cave, two metal rings clung to the rock. A piece of yellow rope was tied between them, and on the rope was another sort of metal ring, a purple one, and from this ring a bright red and orange rope slid down into the darkness. It reminded Lella of a coral snake.

"Somebody's down there," Scott whispered. "Climbers."

They stared at the rope for a while. Then Kate whispered, "Where's the ice?"

And Scott said boldly, out loud, "Down there. I told you we wouldn't see the ice. But if you went down that rope, you'd be there in a second. All the



walls and the floor and the ceiling, too. All ice. Thick ice. I've seen pictures."

"Don't they slip?" Lella asked and then blushed because she knew the question must be stupid—and she was glad no one could see her blush. But she couldn't wait for one of them to suggest that they leave and get back to the sunny world. She was getting cold, and it was very dark when Scott turned off the flashlight to save batteries. She couldn't see why anyone would want to go down into an ice cave.

"That's why they wear spikes," Scott informed her in a condescending voice. She knew Scott didn't want her there, knew that he wanted to be alone with Kate—and Kate had been afraid and had made Lella come along. She wished she hadn't.

"That's why they carry pick-axes," Scott said. "That's why they have the rope."

They sat in silence on the clammy stone floor. Then Scott turned the flashlight on and crept up to the bar. He started leaning over it.

"Scott!" Kate whispered.

He leaned over even farther and put his hand out towards the rope. His right foot slipped suddenly, making a slimy, scraping noise that made Lella catch her breath in fear, but he

caught himself with both hands on the bar again. He turned back to Kate and handed her the flashlight.

"Hold this. I want to see if they're on the rope."

"Don't, Scott!"

"It's okay."

He got into position again and reached over, way over, until he was touching the rope that looked like a snake. It looked as if he was dangling over the vast pit, as if he would lose his balance and suddenly sweep down the slippery rock into nothingness—he pulled on the rope and Lella could see that it was heavy but slack. Triumphantly he jumped back and turned to them.

"You see," he said. "It's slack. That means they're not on it—they're even farther down. They might be hundreds of yards underground, climbing on the ice—they leave the rope here so they can get back up. If we took away the rope, they'd never get out again."

Lella started to feel queasy. No one said anything for a long time, and she couldn't see a thing, since Scott had turned the flashlight off. Her mother had once said that the Legeret boys were nothing but trouble. She wished she had obeyed her mother and stayed home.

"A lot of people have died in there," Scott said, and his voice

was low and flat and hoarse. "Went down and never came out. Probably over a hundred. And animals, too. They say they found an elephant's carcass from the last ice age."

Lella was sure that there were never elephants in Vermont, but she didn't say anything.

"How can there be ice in there, even in the summer?" Kate asked.

"It's like a glacier. It's 'cause the ground's so cold. And there's a secret way out, too. You know that bridge down by the Armory River? With that hole on one side of it?"

Kate nodded. Lella shivered.

"That's it," Scott said. "That's the way out—two miles away. But you'd never find it. There're millions of passages in the ice down there. That's why they all died."

"Let's go," Lella said. "I'm getting cold."

"Yeah," Kate echoed.

Scott turned and shone the flashlight down the hole, following the rope as far as he could. Then he turned back to them. He looked at Kate first, then at Lella; then he coughed, exhaling a white cloud that twisted through the flashlight beam.

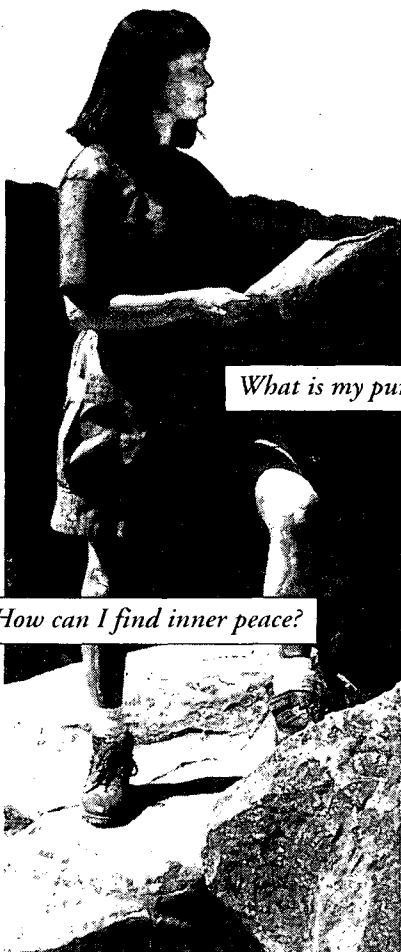
"Okay," he finally said. And then they heard the scream.

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The scream shattered the thick, dark air, the wetness, the cold. It was awful, it was like a lot of things breaking, all at once, things falling down and crushing and splintering and filling your ears with too much noise and breaking glass and sour smells and all the awful things in the world coming at once and smothering you in this awful cave. Lella's body was all tense and her breath had stopped and still the scream kept going, changing from a guttural masculine cry to a high-pitched whimper like a catfight or the pig that she had heard being slaughtered—and then it stopped, and they were alone, in the dark and cold and wet, and none of them said anything. Then she heard the sound of someone sobbing, and Scott turned on the light, and she saw that it wasn't Scott and it wasn't Kate, whose face was pale and whose mouth was stuck wide open but whose eyes were dry. And then she realized that it was she herself who was crying.

Finally Scott whispered at them hoarsely, "Go! Go get help—take the path straight back to the Adamses'. Tell Mrs. Adams to call the cops. Tell them we need a rescue squad. I'll stay here and see if I can help."

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"Don't you go down there, Scott. Don't you dare go down there," Kate said vehemently. "You go, Lella—I'll stay here. We only need one to go."

Lella stared at them for a moment and then, scared to death to go alone but still happy, somehow, to be able to get out of the cave, she scrambled down the barrier of rock and started running up the passage to the warm sky and the Adamses.

It had been a long time since Gavin McCloud had been to the ice cave. As a boy he'd gone there fairly often, clambering down the rungs and along the bottom of the big crevasse; and once, when he was nineteen, a friend who climbed had taken him down into the thing itself. He hadn't been there since—had hardly even thought about it. And in his five years as chief of police in Hansor, Vermont—which meant, as he liked to say, chief of himself—he had never heard of any trouble there and had almost forgotten that it existed. Still, when Mrs. Adams called, he knew exactly what to do; though Hansor was no climbing center—wasn't a center of anything, really—he still carried in his notebook the number of the Mountain Rescue Service, which meant, locally,

the number of Professor William Barnes, Byron scholar and semiprofessional mountaineer at nearby Stilton College. It had been Barnes for years, but he'd heard recently, he didn't know where, that Barnes might be leaving soon. He was up for tenure for the second time, and if he was rejected, it would be a point of honor to go somewhere else. Too bad, Gavin had thought, since Barnes was a decent, friendly man.

He drove to the Adamses', said a few words to Mrs. Adams and the little girl, and started up towards the cave. He hoped the children who had stayed behind hadn't got any big ideas in their heads, and it was this thought that made him walk so remarkably fast through the warm pine woods up gentle Quimby Hill.

He found them at the end of the crevasse, at the entrance to the ice cave proper. They were shivering miserably, crouching by the bar and looking faithfully down into the darkness. They didn't even hear him approach, but when he called their names, they turned to him gratefully, and when he offered his hand to help them over the little barrier, the boy took it as eagerly as the girl. He led them back out into the sunlight, wrapped a blanket

from his knapsack around the girl, and listened to their story.

"And you heard nothing after that?"

When he saw the boy shake his head, he seemed to recognize him from somewhere, but he couldn't remember where.

"No one came out? You didn't hear anyone trying to come up?"

No again. So either they both were dead or it was someone there alone.

They were in a nice warm spot on the top of a little mound. He gave them the chocolate bars he had brought along and told them to wait there until they were warm and full of energy again, and then to walk down to Mrs. Adams' house together; she would see them home. Then he climbed back down into the cave.

Not much later Barnes arrived with two assistants. He was a calm, softspoken man, with the rugged face and glinting eyes of a mountaineer, but this morning his eyes looked clouded over and he seemed shaken.

"I hope this isn't what I think it is," he said somberly.

"It doesn't look too good," Gavin replied.

Barnes stood at the lip of the abyss, looking down warily into the darkness. It seemed as if he wanted to say something but

was afraid to put it into words. Finally he spoke, slowly, pensively.

"Tom Sharpe had breakfast with me this morning," he said. "I wanted to show him an article I'd just written, on Fitzgerald. I'm a Byron man, you know, so I feel a bit awkward on such different ground."

He paused, shaking his head slowly.

"He mentioned that he might be going to the cave. I hope to hell that isn't him in there."

"Was he going to go alone?" Gavin asked.

Barnes shrugged his shoulders, stepping into his climbing harness. His longish brown hair was messy; he wore a dirty storm suit that had once been red and carried a full backpack with a pair of crampons strapped on the outside.

"I don't know," he mumbled.

The two men with him were younger, and both wore glasses. Barnes introduced them simply as Doug and Chip. They had friendly faces and powerful bodies but looked tired.

They watched silently as Barnes set his helmet on his head and clipped the chin strap, then twisted his headlamp to turn it on. He took a black piece of metal in the shape of a figure eight and threaded the red and orange

rope into it, then clipped it onto his harness with a carabiner, hoisted himself over the metal bar, and swung out over the void. He let himself down several yards, then stopped and looked back up.

"Go ahead and start setting her up," he said to the men. "I'll just go have a look."

Silently the men turned to their rucksacks. Doug took out a sort of winch, a big spool with a thin cable rolled up on it. He attached a handle to it and set it on the rocky floor, moving it around until he found a level space. Chip pulled out a battery-driven electric drill.

"Good?" he grunted.

Doug nodded. Chip placed the drill bit through a hole in the base of the winch and pulled the trigger briefly. A sharp whine sounded and then slowly died. He did the same thing in three more places. Then Doug removed the winch and Chip began seriously drilling the four holes in the rock. The noise was magnified by the wet walls, and its screaming was almost unbearable. And then, as the drill was dying after finishing the third hole, they heard an answering scream from down below.

"Hey!"

"Ho!" Doug called back.

"... bad! I'm coming up!"

The voice echoed mutely, distorted by the damp walls. The men looked at each other solemnly, and Gavin, standing uselessly back near the little barrier, felt weary and slightly afraid.

After a few minutes they heard the sound of metal scraping against rock. Then the rope in front of them started shaking back and forth, and they saw the light of Barnes's headlamp floating up to them, and then Barnes himself. He had two yellow contraptions hooked onto the rope, and from each one dangled a loop of cord in which one of his cramponed boots was tucked. He climbed straight up the rope, sliding the yellow things up one after the other. He was badly out of breath and his face was pale, and he stopped just opposite them and stood in the two slings, his knees and hands against the wall. His face was almost white and the muscles in his neck were twitching.

"It's Sharpe," he finally panted. He shook his head vigorously.

"Dead?" Doug asked.

Barnes shook his head. He stared past the two men at Gavin, his eyes wide open and his left eyelid fluttering absurdly, like a lost butterfly in this cold, dead place.

"He's been killed."



\*

Barnes stammered out what he had found. Tom Sharpe was caught up in a Prusik knot halfway down the steepest part of the ice cave: a smooth, frozen waterfall that never unfroze, a challenge for ice climbers, the reason that most of them entered the cave at all. At first, he said, he had looked down from above and seen him hanging there, and had called down to him, gently and then fiercely, hoping against all hope. It was only when he had abseiled down, on his own rope, almost to Tom's level that he saw what had happened to his friend.

He was hanging silently, hunched over into the rope; his face was blue and cold, his hands clasped to his chest. At first, Barnes said, he didn't see it—and even after he had noticed it it seemed unreal, a trick of the mind.

The point of an ice axe was plunged into the back of Tom Sharpe's neck. The shaft of the axe dangled down his spine.

"Oh, Jesus," Gavin said.

Doug and Chip drew back and helped Barnes onto the solid rock where they all stood. He sat down on the metal bar, the crampons still on his boots, scraping whenever he moved with a screeching, grating sound.

"Is there another way out of the cave?" Gavin asked. "I remember hearing something about the Armory bridge . . ."

Barnes shook his head, then bowed it into his hands. Doug answered the question for him.

"No," he said somberly. "That's a rumor that won't seem to die. I've been asked that question a thousand times. But we've mapped every corner of this cave—there's no damned exit." He coughed, looked up at Gavin, and went on.

"It's not nearly that big," he said. "It goes down once, steep; then there's a middle level, flat, and then it goes down again—that's where he must be, you see, halfway down the second drop. And from the bottom of that drop it makes a sort of loop, and comes back to the middle level again. That's it. It isn't very big."

Gavin drew in his breath with his lips curled over his teeth.

"Then he's still down there."

"Who?"

"The killer."

Barnes picked his head up and looked over at him. His arms were shaking.

"He probably left," he said numbly, "after he killed him. It's easy to get out quickly if the ropes are there. But who the hell would kill poor Tom?" He blurted out the question, his

voice shaking, almost out of control.

"I don't know," Gavin said calmly. "But he didn't leave the cave. The kids were here the whole time; no one left the cave."

"I thought the kids reported it," Barnes said.

Gavin shook his head.

"One of them did. The other two stayed here. I found them when I came."

Barnes turned his head and looked down into the cave.

"Christ," he said.

"Can you handle going in again?" Gavin asked. "If I go with you?" He patted the gun at his side.

Barnes stood up suddenly, his steel-shod feet scraping angrily against the floor.

"Okay," he said quietly.

"I'll come, too, Mr. McCloud," Doug murmured. "I knew him, too."

Gavin felt the sweat starting to flow down his lower back. He swallowed hard and glanced down into the black shaft, then started organizing his first manhunt.

He had worn his hiking boots, and now, with Barnes's help, he put on Chip's harness, helmet, and crampons, and took hold of his ice axe. Chip finished bolting the winch down. They were going to go to-

gether, Barnes leading the way, Gavin behind him with his holster unsnapped. They would abseil down twice, passing poor Tom Sharpe the second time, and would arrive at the lowest part of the cave, where the ground was almost level. Then Gavin would go first, with Barnes directing him from behind. Doug would wait, hidden, at the bottom of the frozen waterfall, to be sure the killer didn't run around in circles. They would find him in the loop somewhere; there was nowhere else that he could be. He must have started to climb out and then heard the children talking and decided to wait until they were gone. Now, of course, he would have heard Gavin and the rescuers; he would be ensconced somewhere, ice axe ready, waiting for his hunters. They would go slowly; Gavin would have his gun out, or at least the holster unsnapped; and they were wearing helmets. The odds were very much on their side.

But down in the depths of the cave, without a hint of light except for the beams of their headlamps, crawling on the dirty ice, jamming the crampon points and the ice axe in with every step, feeling the mass of all the rock and earth piled over their poor heads as they bent and hunched to get

through narrow passages, slippery, wet, their breath condensing into a pale fog whenever they exhaled, the odds seemed to have changed. The ice coated the floor and often went halfway up the walls of the passages, forming monstrous, grotesque shapes, but that was not so bad. What was bad was where the walls were rock, where they jutted out and cut back in, and an infinity of nooks and niches and crannies, shadowy, black, hidden places, emerged each time the beams of the lights pointed forward. Gavin was leading Barnes now—they were off the rope—and where he could stand and walk he had his pistol ready to shoot, with the ice axe in the other hand like a walking stick; but where the jagged ceiling reached down almost to the icy floor, or where the ice became too steep, and he had to smash the axe in and then jam the crampon points to keep a hold and not slide down again, there was no way to keep a hand on the gun. He hadn't remembered it like this at all.

They moved slowly, terribly slowly, trying to see or feel or hear around every corner. The ice was gritty, dirty, littered with sharp pebbles and sand fallen from the decaying walls and ceiling. It was exhausting moving this way, and Gavin's

feet kept slipping, scraping back while he felt the horrible lurch of a fall, but every time he saved himself, kicking the toes in hard until they held.

And the deeper in they got the more he realized they were sitting ducks. They were making all the noise, shedding all the light. It was ridiculous even to try to see around the corners in advance, to listen for someone else's hushed breathing above his own labored panting. The walls were narrowing; Barnes had warned him that there was a tight passage ahead where they had to lie down and wriggle through, and it became obvious to Gavin that on the other side of this passage their quarry would be hiding. He had been an idiot, he realized, to think of going this alone. The only sensible thing would have been to go back and call Burlington for reinforcements, for people who knew what they were doing.

He was sweating all over his body but the sweat turned immediately cold as he lay on the dirty ice. If they went back, the only way out would be to climb up the frozen waterfall where the body was hanging—and if they did that, the killer would simply cut the rope, barring their escape. Perhaps he had already. He began to think that he would never get out of the

cave, that the way back was death in one way and the way forward in another. The picture of Tom Sharpe hanging there as they had passed, his stiff, blue, contorted face, the coldness of the injury, the way there was so little blood in evidence . . . the violence, the awful pain, all rose in Gavin's mind and made him shiver horribly.

They were coming to it. The passage ahead was little more than a shoulder's breadth wide, and the ceiling was little more than a foot high. He would have to lie down and slide through it. Everything was ice here—walls, ceiling, floor, a pale gray color in the flashlight beams. He crouched down, pulled the gun from the holster, and wriggled onto his side. The passage was about three feet long; then the corridor widened, and there the assailant would be waiting, standing eagerly, insane, ice axe ready to swing. Gavin's only hope was to see him and shoot at the same instant, hoping that pulling the trigger would be a shorter matter than swinging the axe. But it seemed impossible that the killer wouldn't see him first. And if he turned off his light, he would stand even less of a chance; the noise he made would give him away and the

man would be able to pick him off at will . . .

He rolled over onto his back. That way he could see the most. He pushed back with his feet and slid into the passage, inch by inch, his gun hand right next to his ear. He would be deaf if he ever got the shot off, but he would be dead otherwise—and the thought of the point of the axe coming down, directly into his face, the shiny metal cleaving its way between his eyes, into his skull, made him pause. What if he shot now—what if he emerged wildly shooting, before he even saw the man? It was his only choice. As his helmet reached the end, he would let loose.

He kicked himself into the passage, painfully, slowly. His finger was sweating on the trigger, his eyes were burning, his mouth parched, his whole body was shaking with cold and fear. And then, suddenly, his foot found better purchase than he had expected, and he shot forward and quickly out, and before he even had time to shoot, to pull, to look around, he saw what was waiting for him on the other side of the cramped tunnel.

"Barnes," he whispered back. "Oh, hell, Barnes."

"What is it?"

Barnes's voice was nervous, horrified. And Gavin couldn't help himself, he started to laugh, hard and loud, an uncontrollable, itchy, yelping laughter that echoed crazily in the wide chamber he was standing in. He could see, straight ahead, the red and orange rope that led back up to the cave entrance, to Chip and light and happiness; and there, a bit farther on, the black one that led down to the dead body and, farther, to Doug's little hiding place.

And that was all. There was nothing left, nothing to be afraid of—just a large, empty, ice chamber. He yelled as much back to Barnes and, walking shakily forward, reached the black rope and yelled down to Doug.

"You still there?"

Doug's low voice came back, even and monotone, "Yo!"

"There's no one here," Gavin called down. "Come on back up."

Barnes reached him now, and the two stood breathing heavily. But Gavin felt an edge of joy, almost hilarity in their exhaustion. Even the thought of Tom Sharpe hanging several yards below them hardly pierced their ecstasy at being alive, out of danger, minutes from the sun and trees and the world of light and warmth and

sanity. It would take ten minutes for Doug, experienced and out of danger, to follow the way they had gone in an hour and catch up with them. Then Barnes would show him how to use the yellow Jumar clamps, and they would climb back up the red and orange rope.

"I don't know what to make of it," Gavin said slowly. "Of course there's a homicide squad down from Burlington, so I don't *have* to make something of it, and no one's expecting me to, but the damn thing bothers the hell out of me."

He was sitting in the big easy chair in Max Fremont's living room. The windows were open and a sunny breeze was tickling through the screens; the orange cat was purring on one of the windowsills. Fremont sat in the wooden rocking chair, his thin, wrinkled face conveying sympathy and puzzlement. Mrs. Fremont brought in a little round tray with three tall glasses of lemonade on it.

"Thanks," Gavin murmured. He always felt slightly embarrassed in front of Mrs. Fremont.

She placed the tray on the coffee table in front of the couch, helped herself to a glass,

passed one to her husband, and sat down.

Fremont laughed softly.

"You believe the kids then, that they never moved away from the entrance to the cave?" he asked casually.

Gavin shook his head.

"Why should they lie?" he said. "You should have seen them when I got there, shivering, practically blue. They sure didn't look like they'd been lolling in the sun."

Fremont nodded slowly. He rested his glass on the floor and rocked gently back and forth.

Gavin saw Max Fremont about once a week for a beer at the Big Red restaurant, the only eatery in Hansor. He had a lot of respect for Fremont, a retired police inspector from New York City. He liked to listen to his stories. He had gone to him once before with a case, and Fremont had solved it brilliantly. But even Fremont, he thought, would have a lot of trouble with this one because there was just no way it could make sense.

Fremont shook his head.

"There's something missing," he said. "Something that we need to know. It makes no sense the way it stands. You said there was very little blood on the body?"

Gavin shuddered at the memory. Clipping that cold,

stiff, huddled corpse to the cable, guiding it up as it crashed from wall to wall, swinging erratically, unpredictably, with a dull violence, knocking into them as they tried to guide it, knocking into the ice and the wet rock as Chip cranked the winch, slowly, one foot at a time—it was something he hoped he would be able to forget. And there had been little blood, yes, that had struck him, at least he was thankful for that.

The phone rang. Fremont raised an eyebrow and stood up, walked evenly into the kitchen and picked up the receiver.

"Just a minute," he muttered into it, his voice subdued. He came back into the living room.

"It's for you."

Gavin felt clumsy as he crossed the room, felt that he picked the phone up awkwardly. It was something about being watched by Mrs. Fremont, although she wasn't even watching him—he knew because he didn't feel this awkwardness when he was alone with Max.

The voice on the other end of the phone was disconcertingly cheery and friendly. Bill Camp, Homicide, was a strange character, overeager and jumpy.

"Thought you might want to know," Camp said. "Forensics's found something mighty strange."

Gavin waited.

"Tom Sharpe wasn't killed by that axe."

Gavin's knees suddenly felt weak. He reached back vaguely for a chair, then sat down.

"He was poisoned. Stuff called Vanerol. Expensive, hard to get—takes about two hours to work, and at first the victim doesn't feel a thing. Then a sudden seizure, and it's over almost at once."

Gavin stammered, "What about the axe?"

Camp laughed.

"Yeah—tricky business, huh? The axe came afterwards—for good measure, I suppose. But you noticed how there was so little blood. That's what alerted them at first. It's a wild sort of story. I don't suppose you can make any more of it than we can..."

Gavin was silent for a little while—then, shaking his head, he said, "It doesn't make any sense at all. Even less than before."

Camp laughed.

"Well, if you get any ideas! Meantime we'll keep going on Professor Sharpe—see if we find any skeletons in the old closet. Be in touch."

"So long."

Gavin remained seated for some time, his head spinning. Then he walked shakily out to the living room and told Max Fremont what he'd learned. Fremont slowly nodded his head, then closed his eyes.

The cat stirred on the windowsill. Gavin found his lemonade in his hand and sipped at it slowly. It was tart, sweetened with a touch of honey; floating on the top were little cylinders of ice. It was hard to believe that these little chunks were of the same material as the gritty, hateful stuff in the cave. He felt, once more, thankful to be alive.

The cat jumped down onto the wooden floor, strolled nonchalantly across the room, and squeezed out the little flap cut in the bottom of the screened porch door.

Gavin didn't see that the poison really changed anything, except to make the ice axe inexplicable. The paradox remained. Someone had still put an axe through Tom Sharpe's neck, then left the cave. But no one could have left the cave after Sharpe died because the children had seen no one leave and there was only one way out. But he *must* have left the cave because he wasn't in it any more!

So the children had to be lying. That was what Fremont



had suggested. And he tried to think where he had seen the boy before—Scott Legeret, he'd said, and that rang a vague bell, too—but he couldn't remember anything, just a feeling of something ugly, distasteful, and long past.

He was vaguely aware that Mrs. Fremont had stood up, was collecting the tall glasses and placing them on the tray. He was vaguely aware of her carrying the tray into the kitchen, of the sounds of washing up, of glasses placed onto a drying rack. But he wasn't aware that she had come back into the living room, and when she finally spoke, he was surprised to hear her so near to him, next to his chair, addressing the empty space in the middle of the room. But his surprise at where she was standing didn't begin to rival his surprise at what she said.

"Well then, it's obvious what happened," she stated neutrally, as if she were talking to herself.

Gavin turned to stare at her, then turned to Fremont, who had opened his eyes but didn't look surprised at all. He nodded slowly and smiled at his wife.

Mrs. Fremont sighed and looked down at the floor.

"I wish I could say it surprised me. I wish I could say the evil in people surprises me

more than it does. But after all these years . . ."

And, to Gavin's astonishment, she turned and went back into the kitchen, and he heard the sound of dishes being piled together, a cupboard door opened and then closed.

He looked over, mystified, at Fremont—and he could tell that Fremont, somehow, knew exactly what she was talking about—somehow they had communicated it, or knew each other's thoughts so well that they didn't even have to communicate.

"Well," Fremont smiled at him. "Do you understand?"

Gavin was so bewildered that it took him a while even to shake his head.

Fremont laughed gently.

"You'll have to forgive us if we can't give you the motive," he said apologetically. "Only means and opportunity. But when there's only one person who has the opportunity, then that must be your man, and you know that if you dig you'll find the motive—and you won't have to dig too far. I think you'd better call back Mr. Camp of Homicide, suggest he make an arrest. You wouldn't want this bird to slip away."

Later that night, at the Big Red, Gavin was still shaking his head. He finished the last of

his fried clams, took a swig of Michelob, then said to Fremont, "Does your wife always solve your cases with you?"

Fremont was drinking a red thing called a Belay Pin, which he'd had to instruct the bartender how to make. He imbibed it in little sips, placing the glass back on the table for long periods in between. He coughed gently.

"Often she does," he said. "Especially when it's as obvious as this one. But you would have figured it out yourself, too, soon enough."

Gavin shook his head.

"I don't think so," he admitted. "It was completely dark to me. I never would have got it. Though when you did explain it, it seemed obvious."

He paused, fingering the cold mug of beer, then went on slowly, as if he were talking something out to himself.

"Since the kids heard Tom Sharpe die, and since no one came out of the cave afterwards, and no one was in there when we went down, he must have been alone in the cave when he died. Of course."

Fremont nodded kindly.

"And since only one person went into the cave before I did and saw Tom Sharpe myself, with an ice axe in his neck, it follows that that person must have put the ice axe there. It

has to be. But I still don't understand why. Why would Barnes strike a dead man with an axe?"

"Look," Fremont said, leaning forward and playing with a toothpick on the dark wooden table. "Barnes wanted to get rid of Sharpe—why I don't know, you'll have to tell me afterwards. In any case, he did. He knew he was going into the cave that morning, and he had him over for coffee before he left. He put the Vanerol in the coffee, knowing that it would act on him when he was in the cave. Sharpe would fall down and slide into some corner—or better, off some ledge—and would only be found days later. It was summer vacation, Sharpe wasn't married, there was no one likely to call the Rescue Service in. When he *was* found, the verdict would be accidental death.

"But when the poison acted, those children happened to be there and heard Sharpe's screams. And, worse, he didn't fall off a ledge or down into some corner—he was strapped securely onto the rope, with a clamp or a Prusik or whatever those people use. Barnes had to think fast when he got into the cave. He knew that if Sharpe were found like that, dead for no apparent reason, there'd be an autopsy, and the poisoning

would be discovered. Barnes would be suspected, since he'd served coffee to Sharpe that morning. So he came up with an ingenious plan.

"He would take Sharpe's ice axe and nail him through the neck with it. Everyone would assume that Sharpe had been killed by it, so the killer would have to have been in the cave with Sharpe that morning. Now, since Barnes could account for every minute of his time, he couldn't be suspected of having axed his colleague.

"Brilliant, really. And he might even have got away with it—if it hadn't been for the dedication of those two kids. You mentioned he wasn't aware that they were waiting at the cave the whole damn time. If, as he thought, they had all left to report the thing, everyone would have assumed that the killer, after axing Sharpe, had climbed out of the cave and gone his way—and Barnes's mistake in thinking that a corpse would bleed similarly enough to a live body might never even have been noticed."

Fremont sipped his drink.

"It rarely works," he sighed. "No matter how clever you are, it rarely works. The world is too complex, too random, too obscure. That is the criminal's undoing—luckily, I suppose, for the rest of us. But now it's

your turn. Tell me—what did he do it for?"

Gavin exhaled slowly. He would never have a mind like Fremont's, he knew, and the thought was mildly depressing. But then he remembered the narrow passage in the cave that afternoon and felt again how great it was simply to be alive.

"He 'fessed up pretty quickly," Gavin said. "Said they were both up for tenure, both in the same area. Barnes had already been turned down once. A couple of days ago Sharpe came to him, wanted to show him something he'd written, out of his field—something on Scott Fitzgerald. It seems Sharpe was pretty ingenuous, the kind who didn't think much about competition—he was younger, I guess, and assumed the position was Barnes's—his turn would come later. Anyway, he brought this paper, and Barnes read it, and saw immediately that it was brilliant, groundbreaking. If Sharpe published it, he'd get the position, and Barnes would be rejected once again. But Sharpe had no idea how good the paper was—felt insecure on Fitzgerald when he was a specialist on Keats and Shelley. He hadn't even told anyone what he was working on before showing it to Barnes."

Gavin shrugged.

"What do I understand about it all? This is just what they told me. Barnes saw his chance. Get rid of Sharpe, rewrite the paper in his own words, publish it, and tenure would be guaranteed. Not a particularly nice guy."

Fremont nodded slowly.

"And the ironic thing," Gavin went on, "is what the story was that Sharpe wrote this ingenious paper on. Something called 'The Ice Palace.'"

He shook his head.

"Maybe that's what gave him the idea."

Fremont sipped his Belay Pin, and Gavin stuck his finger in the dish that had held the clams. A few remnants clung to it. And he realized, suddenly,

where he had seen the boy before. He hadn't seen him at all, but his older brother, years ago—Bill Legeret, a couple of classes behind him at Stilton High School. He'd heard he was in jail in Burlington, a local boy gone bad—something about stealing cars. The face, the name . . .

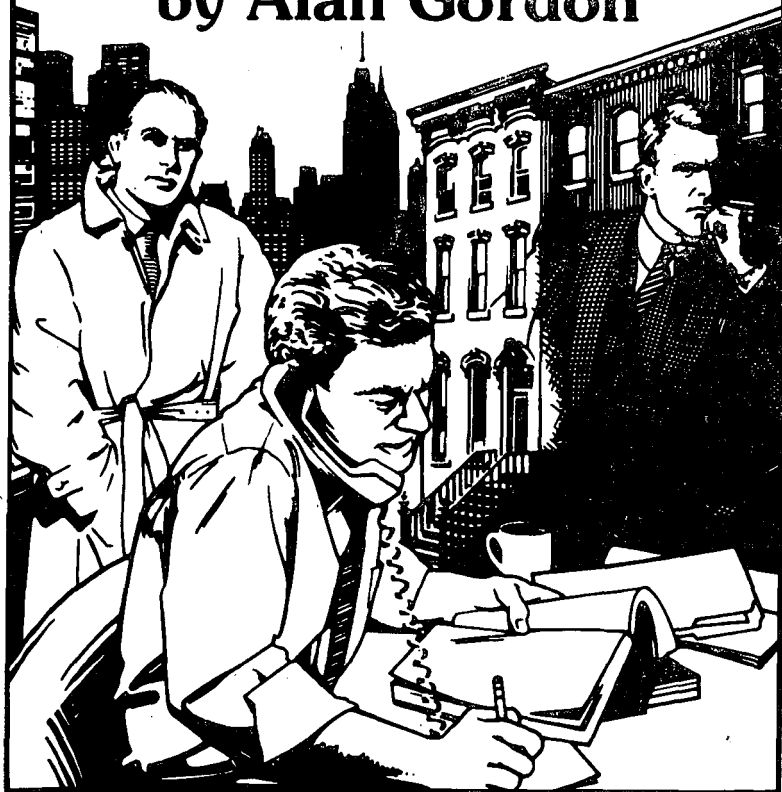
He realized he was being rude, but he brought his finger to his mouth anyway and licked off the salty crumbs. He saw the boy down in the darkness of the cave, and the little girl . . . and then, in his mind, he was back in the ice cave, crampons scraping off the surface of the ice, an unknown killer hiding in every cranny of the rock.

He shivered.

FICTION

# Do Not Go Quiescent into That Frozen Night

by Alan Gordon



*Illustration by Gary Maria*

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**I**t was a clever plan, and required daring, brilliance, perfect timing, and a great deal of luck. Arnie Cassell had daring, brilliance, perfect timing, and almost enough luck, but this was one of those endeavors that fell outside the category of horseshoes and hand grenades. In other words, three and a large fraction out of four meant he was dead.

He didn't know he was dead until a few hours after he had carried out the theft. He was busy packing his bags and making his final arrangements when he heard a car pulling up. He looked out his window to see a black Lincoln with darkened windows parked outside the brownstone. The rear passenger window rolled down to reveal the faces of the Collection Agency. He immediately bolted his front door and shoved an armchair against it to buy himself some time.

Arnie knew them too well to try to run. They would have the back and roof covered, and there wouldn't be enough time for the police to get there. The police might even have been paid off to look the other way for awhile. So Arnie resigned himself to his fate and thought about how he could set his payback scheme in motion without tipping them off.

He thought about how they might have tumbled him so easily. How had they known he had betrayed the trust they placed in him? Because they never trusted him in the first place, he decided. His place was probably bugged, maybe from the beginning. There was no time to look for the bug. Which meant that he had to give Clemente a clue that he would understand and the mob wouldn't.

He dialed Clemente's private line, the one where the secretary didn't pick up and answer, "FBI," so that the whole world would know. Clemente answered on the first ring.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Efrem, this is Arnie Cassell," said Arnie. "This is my last will and testament. You got a pen?"

"Arnie, what's . . ."

"No time. Victor Tango Lucy three seven five three seven. Repeat, Victor Tango Lucy three seven five three seven. Got it?"

"Got it. I'm sending the cavalry."

"The Indians are inside the circled wagons, Efrem," said Arnie as the door was kicked in. The armchair slowed them for all of a second. "Nice knowing you. Find it before they do."

He hung up. There were two large men pointing guns with silencers. He sat down and waited. A few seconds later, a third man

entered holding a small tape recorder. He played it, and Arnie heard his recent telephone conversation emerge from it.

"Hello, Arnie," said the man when it ended.

"Charlie," acknowledged Arnie. He nodded at the other two. "Freddie. I'm sorry, I've known you for years, but I never caught your name."

"He doesn't have one, Arnie," said Charlie. "Where is the money?"

"Can't tell you that," said Arnie. "If I do, I'm a dead man."

"There are many ways to die," said Charlie. "Some hurt more than others. What is Victor Tango Lucy three seven five three seven? An account number?"

"Right," said Arnie. "And if you want to know the bank, you'll have to let me go."

"There's a finite number of banks in the world," said Charlie. "We don't need you for that."

"I didn't just take money," said Arnie calmly.

"You anticipated my next point. The books?"

Arnie shook his head. "They're my ticket out of here. I die, they go to the Feds."

Charlie pulled out another silenced revolver. "There are six bullets in here, Arnie. I can use one or six. Together, we can use eighteen before you die. Tell us how to find our property."

Arnie shook his head. "My buddy Efrem called the cops. You don't have time."

"Then I guess I'll have to make it six, Arnie," said Charlie.

As it turned out, the fifth bullet did the trick.

Special Agent Reynaldo Clemente sped uptown, siren screaming, listening to the police band on his radio. The precinct seemed to be taking forever to get to Cassell's place. He cursed himself for not putting more pressure on Cassell to turn informant. He was cultivating him slowly, not wanting him to panic and run, but something must have gone wrong. The code would have to wait for analysis. He wanted to find Arnie alive.

He arrived at the same time as the local cops. "Lot of traffic three blocks away?" he shouted as he crashed through the broken front door, gun drawn. Arnie was sitting in his favorite armchair, an ascending progression of holes indicating his demise. The room was in disarray. The desk had been emptied, bookcases overturned,



and a painting ripped off the wall revealing an open safe, also empty.

"I'll secure the scene," said one of the cops.

"The hell you will," said Clemente. "This is Federal. I want you standing outside until the rest of my people get here, then you get the hell out."

"Just who do you think you're talking to?" bristled the cop.

"What's the going rate for giving the mob a clear shot?" asked Clemente softly. "Get out of here before I forget about our fraternal ties and break your thin blue neck."

They backed out and Clemente sat patiently until the rest of his team caught up. They looked at Cassell dispassionately and secured the scene. Two started photographing the body while the rest fanned out through the house.

"Rey, check it out," said Riley, his assistant. The base plate on the telephone had been pried open. Other agents found chunks of plaster gouged out of the walls in each room.

"They were bugging him," said Clemente. "And they removed the bugs after they hit him so we couldn't trace them. Pros. Sounds like the Collection Agency."

"Which means no prints," said Simmons, the forensics man.

"Do them anyway," ordered Clemente. "Do everything, just in case."

"Waste of effort," muttered Simmons as he got out his kit.

They turned Cassell over to the M.E.'s people and continued searching. Simpson went along for the autopsy with orders to look into the stomach contents in case any information had been swallowed. A key would be nice, thought Clemente. A nice traceable safe-deposit key that ties in with the account number. Enough of this, he thought. We don't have time. They have a head start, and they probably know more than we do.

"Riley, Gold with me," he said. "The rest of you keep searching, then teams of two on round the clock guard. Maybe they didn't have time to find what they were looking for. Maybe they'll come back to look again. Keep your guns handy and the safeties off, and check in every ten minutes. Maxwell, you do a sweep yet?"

"Just finishing, Rey," said a young woman, watching the read-outs on a small monitor that folded out of a large briefcase. She took a screwdriver and unscrewed the cover from the hallway light switch. "There's still a live one."

"Very nice," said Clemente. "Just in case we found something and talked about it. Traceable?"

"Standard frequency," she said, looking at it. "They're probably within five blocks. Or were."

"Hey, guys," said Clemente into the bug. "We're gonna get you." He pulled it out of the wall and tossed it to Maxwell. "Let's go."

He drove rapidly downtown, the portable flasher strobing on top of his car as it screamed through red lights. Riley, used to Clemente's driving, sat placidly, writing notes on a small pad. Gold sat in the back and wondered how close he was to his deductible.

"It's probably a New York bank," said Clemente. "He couldn't afford to go out of town. Too conspicuous."

"Unless that's what he did and that's how they caught him," commented Riley.

"I think they caught him with the bugs," said Clemente. "Arnie was too smart to get caught on anything obvious. So we check all the New York banks and run that account number. And we do it by five today." It was two thirty.

They hit the office, shanghaied several other agents, and started telephoning banks. They were finished by four thirty, which they would normally consider excellent work, except they had turned up nothing.

"Not a single bank in the city uses that configuration of letters and numbers," said Clemente as he made his report to Mannion, the head of the division. "We're working on national, London, and Swiss now, but I don't think that's where it is."

"What is it that you're looking for, exactly? He didn't even tell you," said Mannion.

"I don't know," Clemente confessed. "But if it was something the Collection Agency would kill to get, then we want it."

"How do you know they haven't got it already?"

"Because when we called the banks, a few of them said they had just been called about the same thing by someone else. That means they're still looking."

"And the banks talked to these mysterious strangers about that kind of information? Unbelievable."

"Well, they felt they should," explained Clemente. "The other caller identified himself as Special Agent Reynaldo Clemente of the FBI. They must have identified my number from his call."

"Son of a bitch," muttered Mannion. "All right, what about Cas-sell's passport?"

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"Missing, believed collected. But his friends say he hasn't traveled in months."

"As far as they know."

"As far as they know," agreed Clemente. "I also considered the possibility that what he gave me was a phone number, with the last digit a dummy to throw off the wiretap. But when I dialed it, the person on the other end had no idea what I was talking about. I also tried dropping the first digit, with the same result."

"If it isn't an account number, what is it?" wondered Mannion. "Map coordinates?"

"Arnie Cassell lived his whole life in New York City. What would he know about coordinates? No, if it isn't an account number, it must be something he thought I would figure out."

"So far, he thought wrong," said Mannion.

"Yes, sir. I'll keep you posted."

They tossed ideas at each other over several boxes of congealing pizza, the traditional overtime meal. They ran the code through various on-line computer networks. ("Maybe it's some kind of E-mail address," speculated Gold.) They pored through telephone books looking for combinations of the three names. ("I'd hate to have wasted all this time thinking it was code and have it turn out to be Victor and Lucy, the tango teachers," said Riley.) By eight thirty, they were out of ideas and desperate.

"That's it, I'm brain dead," said Clemente. "Time to call Litelli."

"Who?" asked Gold.

"Vince Litelli was a detective with NYPD for years," explained Clemente. "Now he heads up security for the new airport. I worked with him on that plane bombing, and he's one of the smartest cops that ever lived. So whenever I need a new angle, I call him."

"What does he know about bank account numbers that we don't know?" asked Gold.

"Let's find out," said Clemente as he picked up the phone.

Litelli had just gotten home when the phone rang. "Hey, Rey, what's up?" he said when he heard the agent's voice.

"Mystery time in the city," said Clemente, and he filled in Litelli on the day's events.

"Was this Arnie Cassell the lawyer?"

"Right. Used to be a local criminal defense guy, then started doing mob work. Ended up representing them exclusively. Did very well. Up until just recently, that is."

"And that's all you got?" asked Litelli when he finished.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Well, that's all I need. Give me Cassell's address, and I'll meet you there."

Clemente, Gold, and Riley stared at the speaker-phone in shock. "Just like that?" said Clemente in disbelief.

"A working theory. I need to test it out. About an hour okay?"

"Oh, yeah, whatever," said Clemente. "We'll be there."

He hung up.

"Not a chance," said Riley. "I know he's supposed to be good, but . . ."

"A real dinner says he does," said Clemente.

"Dinner where?"

"Sylvia's?"

"You're on."

They arrived at the brownstone half an hour before Litelli, and the betting got hot and heavy among the rest of the team when they heard about it. By the time Litelli pulled up, eight agents were hovering around the front stoop, fidgeting.

"Rey," acknowledged Litelli as he got out. "I've met Riley. Hello, everyone."

He shook hands all around, then entered the apartment.

"We've gone through every single book here," volunteered one of the younger agents. "Just in case it was some kind of literary reference."

"That's good work, very good," said Litelli distractedly as he looked at the scene. "But you don't have the right book. Rey?"

"Yes, Vince?"

"Is the scene secured? Have you gotten everything you need here?"

Clemente glanced around at the rest of the agents, who nodded.

"Whatever you need to do, Vince," he said. "We'll watch and learn."

Litelli headed into the kitchen. "I just wanted to get myself a snack while I talk," he explained as they followed him. "I didn't have dinner yet, but I didn't want to disturb anything until you were done."

"Did someone check the kitchen?" whispered Clemente. Three agents raised their hands.

Litelli looked inside the refrigerator. "Almost cleaned out," he observed. "A thorough man. Didn't want to leave any bad smells for the next tenant. I like that."

"He was very thorough," said Clemente.

Litelli opened the freezer and sighed with pleasure as he pulled out a grape Popsicle. "This'll hold me for now," he said. "Now, you did the right thing, calling me. There's no way any Fed was gonna get this." The room smoldered, but Litelli continued. "On the other hand, you didn't need me. Any New York cop could've put you on the right track."

"What do New York cops know that we don't?" demanded Gold angrily.

"New York law," replied Litelli, sucking on the Popsicle. "Arnie Cassell knew it, too. VTL means one thing to any New York cop or criminal lawyer, and one thing only." He pulled a blue book out of his coat pocket and held it up so they could read the title.

"*New York Vehicle and Traffic Law?*" said Clemente. "It's in there?"

"No, that's just the clue. But he picked a cute little section. It's one of the weirdest paragraphs in there, and when you've spent two or three days at the Police Academy learning all these stupid little laws, the instructor will usually bring it up as a joke. And I quote." He opened the book with a flourish, the Popsicle stick tucked into the corner of his mouth. "VTL section three seventy-five, paragraph thirty-seven. 'The commissioner shall promulgate rules and regulations prescribing appropriate cautionary devices to be affixed to motor vehicles engaged in retail sales of frozen desserts directly to consumers. As used in this subdivision, "frozen desserts" shall mean ice cream, frozen custard, French ice cream, French custard ice cream, artificially sweetened ice cream, ice milk, artificially sweetened ice milk, fruit sherbet, non-fruit sherbet, water ices, non-fruit water ices, quiescently frozen confection, quiescently frozen dairy confection . . .' Well, it just goes on and on. God knows how many hours the state legislature spent putting that one together."

"Frozen desserts," said Clemente wonderingly. "You finished that Popsicle yet?"

Litelli pulled it out of his mouth. Only the stick was left, and written on the portion that had been concealed by the grape concoction were the words, "Safety-deposit box 423." "There are five more Popsicles in there," said Litelli. "You kids better have them. I'm on a diet."

Several agents dived at the refrigerator and commenced slurping on behalf of the United States Government. The six sticks ulti-

mately revealed the name of the bank, the particular branch, the account number, the name under which it was rented, and the code word needed to gain access. Clemente carefully placed them in a plastic bag and put them in his pocket.

"You owe me dinner," he said to Riley as money passed among the other bettors. "And I'm buying yours," he said to Litelli.

At nine the next morning, Clemente, Riley, and Gold arrived at the bank armed with six Popsicle sticks and a court order. They were shown to the safe-deposit vaults by the manager herself. She removed a box the size of a small footlocker and, staggering under its weight, carried it into a cubicle.

"You'd better stay with us," advised Clemente. "Just to keep us honest." He lifted the lid, and the four peered inside.

"Holy cow," whispered Riley. "How much do you think is in there?"

"Let's read the note," said Clemente, picking up an envelope with his name on it. There was a letter and a document consisting of six typewritten pages, stapled together, headed "Last Will and Testament of Arnold Cassell." Clemente read the letter out loud.

*"Dear Efrem. Hope you like grape. If you're reading this, then I am dead and you're drooling over three million in cash, give or take. What you really want is underneath. I set up a bunch of corporations for the Collection Agency for laundering cash. I also kept the books, both sets. You'll find the books, along with instructions, account numbers, etc. Get them for me, Efrem. Your snitch manqué, Arnie."*

The books were underneath the cash.

"Gold, call the office and have them send an armored car and escort," ordered Clemente. "Riley, we're going to count this in front of this nice lady, and then seal it in some evidence bags."

"Is it evidence?" asked Riley.

"It is until we know where it came from," answered Clemente. "If we can't tie it into the case, it goes to Arnie's estate, and the tax boys will get their cut."

"No wonder they killed him," said Riley. "And they can't get the money back without explaining where it came from. Beautiful."

"Let's go."

Cassell's posthumous information led them exactly where he intended. Subpoenae were executed, depositions were taken, deals



were struck, and by the end of the year, the key players of the Collection Agency were doing heavy time on RICO convictions.

On the anniversary of Arnie Cassell's death, Clemente and Litelli were among a small group of people present at his headstone unveiling. Underneath the dates was a short epitaph: "I wasn't quick."

"Clever guy," commented Litelli after the ceremony as they wandered through the cemetery. "How come he called you Efrem?"

"After Efrem Zimbalist," replied Clemente.

"Ah."

"Junior. Mr. FBI himself. Poor Arnie. He was a crook who wouldn't be a snitch, and I liked him in spite of everything."

"I'm sorry, Rey."

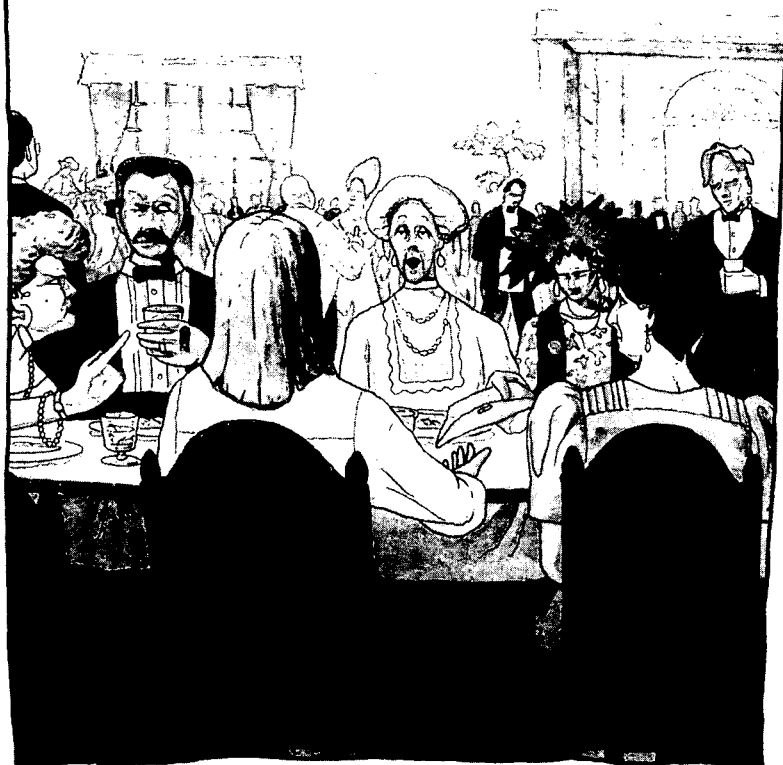
Clemente shrugged. "In his memory, may I buy you a drink?"

Litelli thought for a second. "Tell you what. How about a Pop-sicle?"

FICTION

# Wordsey's Debut

by O. S. Flanagan



*Illustration by Jim Adams*

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When Alma and I entered the Peachwood Country Club, I was snarling under my best phony grin for two good reasons. I'd only had a few hours of sleep thanks to our last case, and I hate formal social occasions. But business is business, so I was smiling. Sorta.

The Peachwood is the ultimate social club for old Atlanta families. First you must be a member of the Lucky Sperm Club before you can be proffered an opportunity to turn over a ridiculously enormous initiation fee and subsequent monthly minimums equal to a house payment. The room was brimming with stiff women bussing each other and men dressed like maitre d's. The younger honorees and their dates were wearing a melange of expressions from excited to bored to vague. The theme of the festivity was country and western. The band was excellent, but the dancers looked a little out of place doing the Tush Push while dressed like the Windsors at dinner.

"Alma, I'm trying, but you know I don't do snobfests very well."

"I know, Callie. But our client, Julia Wainsworth, thinks debutante parties still have a place in life. That's her over there."

Alma pointed to a diminutive silver-haired lady holding court at a table near the bar. The eight chairs at her table were filled except for two presumably reserved for us.

As we approached, I asked Alma, "What's this case about? You neglected to tell me what we're supposed to do for these folks."

Alma murmured under her breath, "Julia wants us to stick twenty-five thousand dollars up General Robert E. Lee's nose."

Julia Wainsworth spoke with a delicious Southern drawl that elongated each word and made it soft like cotton. "Alma, I'm so glad you and your niece could make it. This is my family. My son Alex, his wife Dottie, and my precious granddaughter Wordsey." The three men at the table stood, and Alexander Wainsworth shook my hand. I recognized him from the extensive media coverage of his mediocre term as U. S. senator. He was trim, darkly handsome, and always well dressed, but his mouth routinely reflected a shallow person very impressed with himself. I didn't vote for him.

Dottie Wainsworth had cemented rufous hair and a face that had apparently been the

palette of an overly zealous cosmetician paid on commission. When she smiled, her upper left lip straightened to a thin line, making her expression look like a half sneer. But all that was nothing next to her voice. It was like a dentist's drill gone berserk.

"Thank you so much for coming and helping us." Then she shrieked at the other two men at the table. "I hate to be rude, but could you excuse us for a minute? This is a family matter."

One of the unwanted guests bowed toward Alma. "Good to see you again, Alma." He turned to me. "We haven't met. I'm Justin Livingston, Jr. This great guy is my son, my namesake Trey. Best son a man could have. He's Wordsey's escort. Please excuse us."

Julia handed Alma a bulky envelope and got right to the point. "I received this in the morning mail. Enclosed was a note that we're to pay the blackmail by leaving it at the carving of General Lee on Stone Mountain. If we don't do it Friday, these pictures will be on the front page of Saturday's *Atlanta Journal*."

Alma took the package, looked quickly at the photos in it, and passed them to me. I took them hesitantly, ex-

pecting to see a naked Wainsworth in a Piedmont Park fountain or something equally shocking. Instead there were several sepia-colored shots, evidently made at night with infrared film, of two men exchanging papers on a street corner.

Big deal.

Then I recognized the two men. One was Alex Wainsworth. The other was Douglas St. Tanner, an Atlanta attorney recently convicted of money laundering, drug trafficking, and income tax evasion. He'd also been implicated in two unsolved murders involving his business associates.

In amazement I blurted out, "You did business with Douglas St. Tanner?"

Dottie took over in that awful screeching voice. "At least it isn't Alex with one of his women friends. But, yes, after all this family has done to get him in office, this fool managed to go to the biggest crook in Atlanta to get financial assistance. And just before reelection."

I looked at Wordsey, who had yet to utter a syllable. She must have been named after her mother; Dottie couldn't shut up. The girl had unfortunately found the haute couture of grunge. She'd probably spent a fortune to look like a fashion-

ably coordinated bag lady. Her auburn hair, done into a mutant cocklebur, completed her trashy appearance. She was staring silently at her dinner plate.

Julia spoke again. "Alma, I'll pay if I have to. I'd give everything I have to preserve my family and our name. Saturday is Wordsey's coming out party. I will not have it ruined. But you must find the perpetrator or I feel certain this won't end until I'm out of money."

Alma and I turned in unison to Alex. I was expecting to hear why an adult public servant was letting his mama do this for him. Well, the supposedly consummate Southern gentleman certainly surprised me.

"I don't think Mother should spend her money on having you investigate this matter. There's no doubt that my darling wife took those pictures. Only she would have had access to my schedule at home and therefore have known when to follow me. Her hobby is photography. She even has a home darkroom. Mighty damn handy!"

Anger made Dottie's voice even more irritating. Have you ever heard the sound a peacock makes? Something like that. "Why in the hell would I blackmail you? I could just divorce you and have all your money."

"Because I don't have any money. You've spent it all. Mother has money, but she wouldn't give you water in the desert. And look around at your favorite place on earth, The Club, and count how many ex-wives are allowed in after the decree is signed. Exactly none."

Dottie evidently insists on having the last word. "Well, maybe I did take them. You'll never know unless I lend you some of my small unmarked bills next time you're a little short."

Everyone else at the table stared at them in silence until Wordsey finally spoke. "Daddy, no! Don't say things like that. It's some stranger. I'm sure of that. And I agree with Gran-Gran that she should pay the money."

These folks gave new dimensions to the term dysfunctional family. But I admire older women who don't publicly tell their nutty offspring to take a hike. With the exception of Julia, I hadn't met a soul that I'd voluntarily give street directions to, much less bail their socially correct behinds out of ruin and shame, but like I said before, business is business. And Julia was the client and Alma's friend. And Alma's the boss.

Dottie and Alex continued growling at each other while

Julia and Alma worked out a fee arrangement. Trey Livingston returned to the table carrying a cocktail. I try not to make snap decisions, but I have a problem with young men who wear dangling earrings. But that wasn't all. His tuxedo coat flared when he sat down, and I saw the butt of a handgun protruding from his waistband. Why in hell did this kid need a gun at the Peachwood? Did he expect to be attacked by the caddymaster? With any luck at all, I thought, he'd shoot off his own behind halfway through the first Achy Breaky.

I attempted to make conversation with Wordsey and Trey. "Where do you go to school?"

"Georgia Tech," Trey said. "My father graduated from Tech, too. I'm in industrial management, but next fall, when Dad wins Alex's senatorial seat, I'm going to be his aide." He took a gulp of his drink. "Is it true that you two are the P. I.'s to the bluehairs?"

I really wanted to say something snide but swallowed it. "My aunt has a detective agency. I work for her. We specialize in discreet inquiries."

Thankfully Joe Cool wanted to dance, so he and Wordsey left the table. I studied the blackmail note. It was on letter-sized plain paper with no watermark. I figured everyone

in the Wainsworth family had handled it by now, so fingerprints weren't going to help. The directions were precise.

*On Friday night at eight, go to Stone Mountain Park. Go to the back of the Train Depot and walk toward General Lee. When you get to a rock wall where you can see up General Lee's nose (I recommend a 300mm lens on your camera), throw a bag of \$25,000, small bills, over the wall. Come alone because I can see you.*

When you can see up General Lee's nose? Oh, please!

The next morning I arrived at the Wainsworths' antebellum mansion on a quiet oak-lined street in Buckhead, the residential mecca of old Atlanta money. After a uniformed maid ushered me into what looked like a miniature Library of Congress, I killed the next few minutes reading book titles from the endless collection. My attention was diverted by Wordsey and Trey. They were arguing on the patio just outside open french doors.

Wordsey was pouting. And pacing. "I'm worried about my folks. She's always put up with his affairs because she doesn't want to give up being Mrs. Wainsworth. But this may be more than she's willing to take."

"What do you care? They ignore you most of the time."

"This is such a mess. And now Gran-Gran's called those detectives."

I heard Trey mutter, "Why would anyone hire a couple of old lady detectives?"

I didn't want to admit I was eavesdropping. Otherwise, this 1953 vintage old lady would have decked the young snot. Just then Wordsey noticed me.

The two of them entered the room.

"Are you here to get the money?"

"Yes. But it's only temporary because we're going to find the blackmailer. I assure you of that."

Wordsey looked worried and nervous. She thought for a moment and then spoke with determination. "You may not want to do that." She opened a side door and pointed into a closet. "This is my mother's darkroom. I know how to use it."

I looked into what had originally been a powder room. On the shelves were several cameras, lenses, filters, and developing compounds. Small labels indicated what was to be put where. The counter was covered with trays, stacked and labeled, and an enlarger. Dottie might have been a little neurotic, but she was neat and or-

ganized. I like to dabble in photography, and this was a very impressive setup.

Trey stepped into the small room and opened a small refrigerator. He pulled out a beer and popped the top without offering anyone else refreshment. "Shut up, Wordsey." He was absent-mindedly scratching at a raging rash on his forearms. Then he tried cooling the itch with the cool bottom of the beer can between swigs. Mostly he looked like he wished he was somewhere else.

"No. I think Callie likes my grandmother, and she realizes that it would kill her to know that I took those pictures. It was no big deal. I didn't have to be Ansel Adams. You see, Trey and I want to get married, but Gran-Gran opposes it. We need some money to get started when we get to Washington."

I wondered momentarily if we'd get paid for a voluntary confession. She was right about one thing. I'd watched Julia look at her granddaughter, and she adored her. "You took those pictures?"

"Yep. I had access to my father's appointment diary, too. Trey and I come and go as we please in this house. So I got some of that nighttime film off the shelf. Then I followed Daddy and took the pictures."



Trey choked loudly on his beer. I didn't offer to beat him on the back.

I liked this less every minute. Trey didn't look very comfortable either. "Did you use a telephoto lens? How did you do it?"

She answered quickly. "I used a long lens. I just waited until he handed over those papers. I focused and shot the pictures. So I suggest you pay the money and quit investigating or you'll be known as the heart-break detectives in this town. Everyone loves Gran-Gran."

I looked at her companion, who was intently studying his nasty running shoes and fiddling with something in his jacket pocket.

Before I could say anything else, Julia Wainsworth entered the room. Wordsey looked at me with raised eyebrows, almost defying me to tell, and left through the french doors. Trey gulped down the last of his beer and stepped into the darkroom where he deposited the can loudly by tossing it from a distance into a metal receptacle. He gave me a particularly unpleasant grin as he made his exit.

Suddenly I felt like a jerk because I knew I should tell Julia about Wordsey's confession. Instead I decided to keep my

mouth shut until I could talk to Alma.

Julia gave me the vinyl bag of currency, and I left the Wainsworth estate. But not before I took another look at Dottie's darkroom. This time I noticed a red lens filter lying on the work surface by the enlarger.

Stone Mountain is surrounded by a three thousand acre state park sixteen miles northeast of Atlanta. According to the brochure, the mountain comprises almost six hundred acres of solid granite, rising to eight hundred feet above the surrounding land. It's also a major dividing ridge that causes rain water running off its eastern slope to end up in the Atlantic while the western runoff goes into the Gulf of Mexico. About halfway up the north face is the world's largest piece of sculpture. A ninety by one hundred ninety foot carving depicts Confederate president Jefferson Davis and Generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson on their horses.

I got to the park before eight o'clock and followed the signs to the Train Depot. I parked at the depot and walked around the building to where the last train of the evening was waiting for passengers to board for

a half hour trip around the mountain. The "authentic" engineer was dozing in the window of the locomotive.

I crossed the tracks and walked toward the monument. Nearby, a granite sidewalk encircled a small pond. I continued past a fifteen foot statue of a woman holding an infant on her shoulder. "The country came before me," Caroline Deslondes Beauregard." I'd never heard of Caroline.

A little farther on I came to a circular patio surrounded by a rock wall. I trained my camera on the carving and discovered that I was too far to the right to see up General Lee's nose.

I turned around and found another path leading to the left of the carving. On the other side of the pond was a matching rounded granite wall that rose from about three feet to a maximum height of fifteen feet. Sure enough, from this angle, you could see right up the old boy's nostrils.

I looked behind the wall and found a little path that dropped off to a dirt maintenance road. I was sure I was being watched from the dense undergrowth, but in the oncoming night I couldn't see a thing. The smell of honeysuckle was thick. Poison ivy was rampant, and wild blackberry thorns reached out

and scratched me. I looked back and realized that with the park lights behind me, anyone could see whether or not I was alone. Because of the curve in the wall and the thick shrubs at the end, there was no way I could throw the bag over the wall and then run around fast enough to see it picked up. It was a great drop spot. My congratulations went to the perpetrator.

I was instructed to make the payment, so I did. I threw the bag as I was told but still sprinted to the back of the wall. The package was gone, and all I could hear was the roar of a vehicle tearing down the dirt road. It was a good plan.

Except for one thing.

I was back at the office before ten o'clock. Alma listened while I told her about my conversations at Chateau Wainsworth and about the trip to Stone Mountain.

She listened carefully, thumbed through some reference books on photography, and finally said, "Well, we know who did and who didn't do this meanness. Tomorrow morning we'll go get the money back."

**A**lma and I drove by the house near the Georgia Tech campus several times before stop-

ping. It was in desperate need of a paint job. Actually it was in urgent need of condemning. Many college students had probably considered it avant-garde, cool, hip, or rad, depending on their generation. But no matter what decade you matured in, it was the kind of place that you'd leave quickly and never revisit, not even for sentimental reasons.

Alma took the car and continued to circle the block while I walked into the back yard from the parallel street. I was prepared to pick the lock, but it wasn't necessary. The back door wasn't secured. I roamed through the first floor of the house. In the bathroom I found darkroom equipment.

After more searching I found the negatives taped to the back of a framed poster of The Grateful Dead in the bedroom. How could anyone wake up to see that every morning?

Then I heard a noise behind me. I turned and there stood Trey wearing filthy gym shorts and a T-shirt that proclaimed "Life's a bitch and then we die." I hate that aphorism. The young philosopher king bestowed on me a particularly odious look.

Show time!

"Hello, Trey. I came to get the money back."

Trey scratched the crimson outbreak on his arms. "Don't know what you mean."

"Sure you do. The blackmail money. I imagine you got that rash when you checked out the drop point. I'd guess you practiced dashing through the poison ivy a few times, maybe timing your getaway."

"I could have gotten this anywhere."

"True. But Wordsey was lying about taking the pictures, and I think you're the only person she'd do that for. And I watched you. You flinched when she said she got the film off the shelf and again when she said she just aimed and shot. You knew that the infrared film has to be kept refrigerated. Probably in that little refrigerator where you get your beer. And you evidently also know that with that film, after you focus, you turn the distance setting to a special infrared index mark on the lens. You don't 'just shoot' as Wordsey said. Face it, Wordsey doesn't know an f-stop from a bus stop.

"But the biggies are these negatives I found behind your artwork and the red filter you borrowed to use with the infrared film and then returned to the darkroom. I noticed it after you threw away your beer can and knew it wasn't there before when I looked around. So I took

it and we got your fingerprints off the glass surfaces."

The part about the prints was a lie, but I figured I wasn't dealing with Alfred Nobel so why not embellish a little.

"But why did you do it? You don't need the money."

He sneered at me. "Okay, I'll tell you, since you can't prove a thing. I'm helping my dad. I plan to publish those pictures anyway so Dad'll win the election. The money is just an added bonus. Then I'll ditch that airhead Wordsey and head for D.C." He reached behind his back and pulled out his gun.

What a jerk. If he was a chip off the old block, heaven help the taxpayers if The Old Block got elected.

I spoke into the little microphone by the golf club pin on my lapel. "Did you get all that, Alma?"

Did I mention that Alma's husband is sometimes confined to a wheelchair by rheumatoid arthritis? During one of those bouts he studied electronic surveillance and later supervised our acquisition of some pretty fancy equipment. He said that someday it might help keep us safe. Thanks, Uncle George.

Her voice projected clearly from my jacket pocket. I pulled out the walkie-talkie. "Got it on tape, Callie. I'd suggest that Mr. Livingston now allow you to leave."

He did.

I looked up that quote from the park. Caroline was the wife of General Pierre Beauregard, an inordinately dedicated Confederate soldier. Seems he was more interested in fighting than loving. Sorta reminds me of my ex-husband. My sentiments, Caroline.

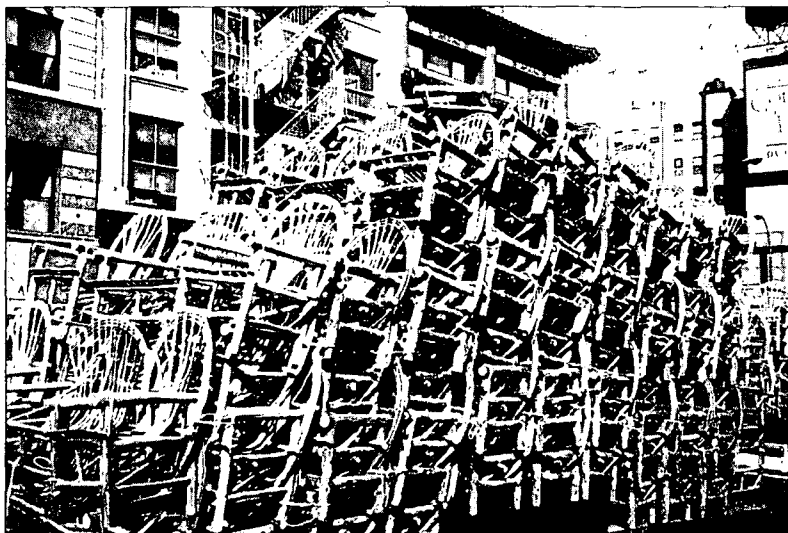
The Wainsworths refused to press charges because of the notoriety, but they did let me tell Justin, Jr., what his precious loin fruit had been up to and how many people knew about it.

I forgot to tell Julia about Wordsey's peripheral involvement. Maybe when I see her next time. Maybe not.

Both Alex Wainsworth and Justin Livingston judiciously decided to withdraw from the political race. A woman friend of Alma's won that senate seat by a landslide.

No, we haven't done any work for her. Not yet. . . .

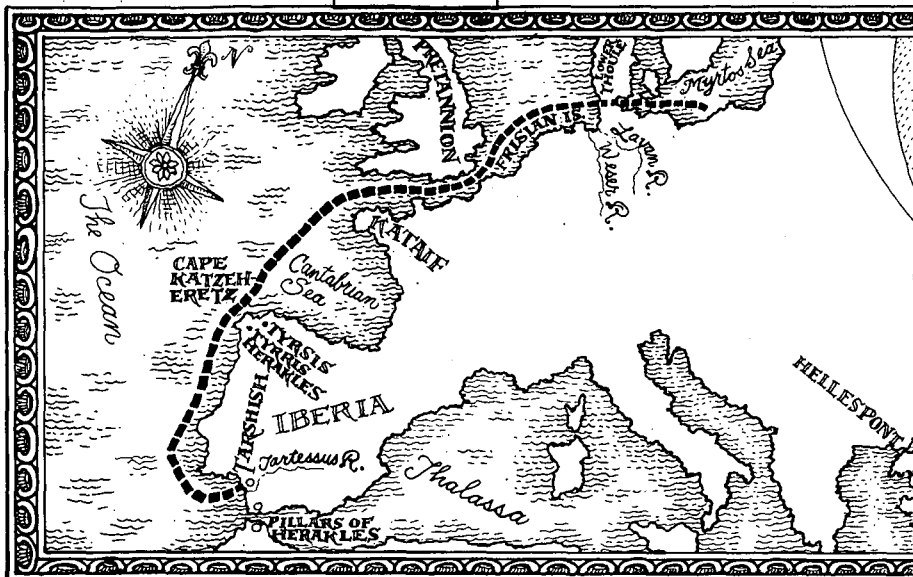
# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

A flock? A herd? A bevy? A gang? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "April Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.



Uncle Hiram was a small man with a beard like a date cluster, and dark even by Phoenician standards. Right now his turban was pushed askew and his head needed shaving. I glanced over the railing into the outer office. A few years ago there'd been a hundred scribes out there checking invoices and bills of lading. I used to watch them, marveling at the speed with which they flipped styli from end to end, balancing their accounts with neat little lines of dots and wedges.

Uncle Hiram erased wet clay with the palm of his hand and began pricking another line.

"Hello, Hanno," he said.  
"Squat."

"Sorry, Uncle, I've only got a minute. Assurbanipal just got in a load from Egypt and I want to get there before the king's buyer gets all the fat ones."

"That can wait," my uncle said.

"I may not get another chance for six months!"

"You'll be back before then."

I had a pretty good idea of what was coming next, and I didn't think much of it. "I'm not going anywhere," I said, but Uncle Hiram wasn't having any.

"Squat."

**"But I just got back!"**

"Hanno, *squat!*"



# TINHORN FROM TARSHISH

by G. C. Edmondson



I squatted.

"We're in trouble."

I groaned. "When aren't we?"

Out on the flat spot where tablets were pressed out, our remaining ten bookkeepers were rolling bones. I glanced past them at the empty warehouses. "Well," I sighed, "you can't keep a monopoly forever."

"Who wants a monopoly?"

Uncle Hiram wailed. "I'd be happy with just a little stock."

"What's wrong?"

"I wish I knew. You'll have to get up to the northern depot and get the goods moving again before we're in receivership."

"Is it that bad?"

"Tyre's under siege. I saw As-

surbanipal this morning and got the news while you were still sleeping off last night's orgy. The Egyptians are having troubles, and things are in an uproar all over the east."

"So what else is new?"

"What do you suppose'll happen if those Centaurs ever bypass us?"

I felt a chill where the tail of my turban hung between my shoulders. If they ever push across Europe, it's goodbye, Tarshish.

The Centaurs came out of Asia with a new animal like a pony only faster. And *big*. It was so big a man could ride on its back. When one was coming



at you Sheol-for-breakfast and shooting twenty arrows a minute from a horned bow, it was hard to tell where the man left off and the animal began.

"But our northern depot is hundreds of days from Centaur country," I protested. "Besides, a horned bow won't stay glued in that miserable climate."

"I didn't say they were there," Uncle Hiram snapped. "But the Board of Trade is unhappy, and if you don't get up to the Myrtos Station soon and straighten things out, I just might lose my charter."

"Just because we're a little late with this quarter's return?"

"And last quarter's, but that's not why the king's after my head." Uncle Hiram sighed and looked older. "We bungled an affair of state."

We? I waited.

"It was back at the Tauris depot. The Scythians are having an attack of nationalism."

"So what? Has there ever been a trading post didn't get TARSHISH, GO HOME! painted on it once in a while?"

"We had that part of it patched up pretty well," my uncle continued. "You know that native custom of one man and one woman living together all their lives?"

"Don't they get sick of each other?"

"They don't live long enough. A girl's lucky to live through her first baby. And the men are so busy killing each other they've never found out if you can trust anyone over thirty. Anyway," Uncle Hiram shrugged, "a—oh shrivel it!—what's the word? *marriage*—that's it, had been arranged. You know the routine: a half-breed prince and everybody's happy."

I was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"A local family came up with a girl. The factor at our Tauris stockade shipped her off to Tarshish. It was up to the king here to find a pigeon who'd—*marry* her, that's the word for it."

"But I'm just a babe in arms—"

"Oh, settle down. You don't have to marry her."

I waited, wondering what next.

"No girl," Uncle Hiram said. "No girl, no ship, no marriage. It was my ship, so it's my fault—as if I had any control over the storms or Underwater People or pirates or a hundred other things that could happen between the Pontos Axeinos and Iberia."

"I don't see what I can do about it."

"Nobody expects you to. Just get up there and see what in

Sheol's going on up at the Myrtos Station. Get the goods moving so we can pay our taxes, and maybe the king'll get off my back."

"How do I get there?"

Uncle Hiram looked at me keenly. "The *Ishtar*, of course."

That changed things. After lugging a sample case until I was round-shouldered, I was finally getting a ship. And it was about time. If the gods lent me life, I'd be seventeen before the next Sun Sacrifice. Any other man in a shipowning family would have been trading on his own a year ago. I rushed out of the warehouse.

Down by the river I found Abner superintending a gang of carpenters. Several of *Ishtar's* planks were being replaced, along with all her sewing. "Hanno!" he shouted, "I hear you're stuck with her."

I nodded, trying not to grin like a jackass eating thorns.

Abner's evil face split into a smile. He was taller than Uncle Hiram but had the same date-cluster beard. He was even uglier than I remembered from days aboard my father's ship. "How're we fixed for crew?" I asked.

"Not too good."

The banks of the Tartessus River were littered with beached ships, but I didn't see any men apart from the gang

Abner had working. I wandered back upriver towards the mudbrick taverns where beached sailors hung out. After a couple of hours I began to wonder if I shouldn't have done a little more checking up after I'd arrived home. The *Ishtar* was a good ship, and my Uncle Hiram was always known to feed well. Why weren't these hungry sons of nobody scrambling for a chance to pull an oar? I fished as much as I dared, for a skipper is supposed to know all without having ever to ask any questions. No luck. As soon as I mentioned a voyage to the northern depot they started backing away as if I had the Egyptian Sickness.

That night my uncle dragged me to a Board of Trade meeting. The old palace was the biggest building in Tarshish and dated from times when even civilized people still worked flint. It was a monstrous, drafty old place, made of stone blocks so big I often wondered how they ever got them in place without proper machinery. The king was not particularly happy living there, but it was handy for meetings like this and the thick stone walls did have a certain advantage. When times get bad, people always think it's the king's fault.

But politics wasn't worrying me at the moment. "Uncle," I

finally said, "you used to send two ships a month up there during the season. The warehouse ought to be full by now. How many have you sent?"

Uncle Hiram's answer was a trifle too quick.

"Men don't care to sign on," I pressed. "I have a feeling that you're being less than frank with me."

My uncle gave me a hurt look. "Why lie? My own sons are all dead or captive. Someday you'll have to run it if there's any business left to run."

Knowing one of my cousins was already ransomed and on his way home, I was unimpressed. "Yes, Uncle," I said, "we're just one big happy family, but we won't be if you don't get off it and tell me what kind of a deal you're sending me into cold."

Suddenly he sagged. "I've watched the flight of birds," he said. "I've tossed bones. I've sacrificed to the beer and sun gods. I've practiced scatology and tyromancy; I've sliced chicken livers. Nothing's given me a hint of what happened to my eight ships."

*Eight!* "Do you suppose it's the Underwater People?"

Uncle Hiram gave me an odd look. "You actually believe that crap we made up to scare the Greeks?" A voice hailed us

from an open-fronted tavern. It was Abner. The bartender brought reeds, and we squatted to suck beer. "What's the cargo?" Abner asked.

"The usual," Uncle Hiram said. "Bronze knives, axes, blue glass beads."

I studied the design in the beer crock. There were figures of animals like the gorillas down on the Gold Coast. Local gods, I decided. I wondered where the crock came from.

I spent the better part of another week scrounging around to fill out my crew. It wasn't easy. I bought most of them from their owners, but I did find two freedmen ready to sell themselves for a pot of beer and the prospect of steady eating.

Uncle Hiram stood by worriedly and tallied goods while we loaded. Then I went to spend my last night in Tarshish. It wasn't a very satisfactory night because the king's buyer had latched onto all the fat ones. Paleface girls smiled and beckoned from their mudbrick cribs, but that white skin chills me. Reminds me of snow, I guess.

We shoved off at dawn, Abner beating a slow five on the sounding board. Oars flashed raggedly as the new men tried to pick up the beat. After a few strokes they more or less got with it, and I relaxed. The *Ish-tar* was almost seven years old

now, but she still made a fine picture as we slipped down the Tartessus on the morning tide, her oars flashing in the sun and sixty men putting their backs into it. Her long bowsprit trembled and thrummed as the lashings from the extending keel swished down the muddy old river. Inexperienced oarsmen did their best, but the sun was nearly down before we reached the first entrepôt. While Abner got the fire started and the men settled in, I swept out the shrine and made the best deal I could with the gods.

Next morning we passed by the still smoking beacon, and as a clumsy trireme with a load of copper from Cyprus labored upriver, Abner raised the beat to twelve. Oarsmen cursed and broke wind, then the bow broke clear of the water and the thrumming stopped. The *Ishtar* lifted over a long Ocean comber, and the muddy river water began turning green. I leaned on the steering oar, and she slowly turned west.

Fresh-sawn timbers groaned, and little spurts of water came through the seams. Abner put the scrawniest rowers to bailing, and we continued under way with several oars shipped. Leaning against the steering sweep, I started calling up the gods. At the proper times I threw bread overboard and

poured out the half crock of beer I had ready. Then I remembered the eight unreported ships. I heaved more bread and dumped the rest of the beer. Gods are unpredictable, but it pays to stay on their good side.

Abner swung mallets and roared each time a rower broke rhythm. A breeze from dead ahead shortened the chop, and our inexperienced oarsmen caught crabs more often. I struggled to keep a heading, and Abner glanced at me in mute despair. After seven hours the men wilted until I could barely hold steerageway. They revived when I came about to shoot a landing.

We spread the goods out to dry while woodcutters scavenged the barren, low-lying coast. I got out pots of barley. By the time the woodcutters were back, I had talked things over with the gods and was ready to brew. In spite of the headwinds and hayseed oarsmen we'd made twelve miles.

Under weeks of blazing sun and dead calms we skirted the Iberian coast, around the rocky headland and up past the Tagus. By the time we reached Cape Katzeh-Eretz, Abner had consigned two worn out oarsmen to the Underwater People. I did not care to ruin any man's chance for Life Eternal, but

this lack of burial seems to help the living learn how to row.

That night Abner and I talked over a new problem. The Underwater People are nearly as treacherous as the gods. Sometimes I wonder if they even understand the chants, or if our spells can bind them at all. Still, you've got to try. If a stranger isn't interested in trade, there isn't much you can do except kill him. But there're probably more of them than there are of us. "Do you think they'll let us across?" I wondered.

Abner shrugged. "You remember what happened to your father's ship," he said. "Still, it's three times farther if we follow the coast. Maybe the bastards'll be satisfied with those two we threw overboard and let the rest of us cross."

"I'm for trying it," I said.

Abner's teeth flashed in the firelight, and I wished I were as fearless as he seemed to think me. I did remember what had happened to my father's ship.

At dawn I threw bread and beer overboard and hoped the gods would earn their keep on the long haul across the Cantabrian Sea. When the breeze sprang up dead astern, it looked like they were going to. A working party ran to get the mast. The purple phoenix's wings flapped realistically as

the sail was sheeted home. Oarsmen pulled their cloaks tight and curled up under the benches.

By noon the wind was stronger, and a following sea began piling up. "Want to shift cargo?" Abner asked.

I'd been thinking a while and shook my head. "Rig extra clew lines." Abner was puzzled, but he went forward to give encouragement while men struggled with the sail's lower corners.

"Now lead those new lines to the bowsprit."

As they tightened, I had sheets slacked until the sail stretched well forward of the spar. There was sudden silence as the bow lashings lifted clear of the water and the *Ishtar* shot forward like a Centaur. As the steering oar came firm in my hands I knew we were out-running the seas and in no danger of being pooped. Abner looked at me wonderingly. "Whatever gave you an idea like that?"

"I've been looking at seagulls' wings. The gods brought me a vision."

The sun died, and two hours later the unmoving Phoenician Star glittered dead ahead. I wrapped myself in my cloak and settled down, keeping an eye open for the stealthy hands of the Underwater People.

We've tried everything to make peace with them—trade, bribery, sacrifices, gifts. But the bastards just pop their heads up and look at you. They never have a word to say—won't answer our interpreters and, believe me, we've tried every civilized language and a few that aren't. They just stare at us with those inscrutable eyes, then turn and disappear, and next thing you know another ship's reported missing. You'd think we could make some kind of a deal. . . .

At dawn we hove the lead and found no bottom. While Abner broke out bread and figs for the oarsmen, I sacrificed. Wind came from the southwest again before we'd finished breakfast, and I was silently thankful that I'd never tried to swindle the gods with watered beer like some skippers I know.

Abner and I spelled each other steering, and that night I felt a ground swell. Then the moon rose, so I let the *Ishtar* gallop on. The lead indicated shoaling water, but still we sighted no land. I began having terrible thoughts of piling into something at fifteen knots. As I wondered what lay behind a cloud off the starboard bow, the moon hid and left us shooting along in a nothingness as black as Uncle Hiram's beard. After a couple of well chosen remarks

I was about to go prod Abner when he woke with the change of motion. I tried to steer back onto the wind, but when I did, the waves were hitting the wrong angle. "Better brail up," I said.

Abner grunted and quietly woke a couple of men without rousing the whole crew. Within minutes they had unrigged my fancy sail setting and brailed up the clews, leaving only the tiniest triangle of the huge square sail still pulling. As the *Ishtar* ghosted through blackness, the ground swell became more apparent, but now speed had been reduced so we could do several things instead of just piling blindly onto whatever beach or rocks lay ahead.

Clouds parted momentarily, and the moon was in the wrong place. I hauled at the steering oar until the moon was back where it belonged. Now the ocean didn't feel right. The swell was crossways and the waves . . .

"I knew it!" Abner grouched.

So did I. In this stretch of our run, a good breeze would sometimes back steadily to give a westing and blow us away from that dangerous lee shore. But after the startling success of my new way to set a sail, the gods were through handing out favors for one night. The wind was veering, turning in the op-

posite direction. We had started out this night with enough westing to clear Kataif with room to spare. Now the veer was driving us back. The growing ground swell meant the bottom was turning shallow. Abner shouted all hands awake, and we hauled the yard about to point as high as the old *Ishtar* could.

There have been countless stories of ships that could actually sail into the wind, but during my seventeen years I had never actually seen one. The *Ishtar* had good lines and a well-balanced rig, but the best she could do was a broad reach, bowling precariously along northward at right angles to the wind, with the lee free-board shipping water from time to time.

I put a nervous nelly of an oarsman up in the bows to listen for breakers. I assumed he had the best ears because he was always the first to say, "What's that?" The rest of the men rolled up in their cloaks. Abner and I braced ourselves against the steering oar, which always fought back harder sailing at this angle.

Finally the moon was visible again for another moment. Abner compared its position with the heading of our bow and said something that probably canceled out my last week of

prayer and sacrifice. "Sorry," he said when he saw my consternation.

But I couldn't blame him. We gritted our teeth and let out the sail. "Could be worse," Abner said through clenched teeth.

"It will be," I said.

Six turns of the glass passed with no sight of the moon. Meanwhile, the direction of the seas was in constant discord with the wind. Finally light began to show in the east. *And off the port bow!*

Abner made a sound like sailcloth ripping, then added a couple of words I'd never heard before.

In the dawn's early light the *Ishtar* was now heading south-east: back down toward the Galician coast of northern Iberia. Our chances were even for piling up at Tyrris Herakles or Tyrsis. I hoped it was Tyrsis, where we sometimes put in for water and groceries and enjoyed a semifriendly relationship with the locals. But of course the gods had to have their little joke.

Must have been some combination of wind and current but next morning when the coast hove into sight I looked it over, conscious of the sixty-odd oarsmen, who worked best when they could preserve a perfect faith in their skipper's infallibility. I looked wise and made



a couple of meaningless scratches on my wet clay tablet and acted just as if I knew what I was doing. It worked for the oarsmen, but it didn't fool Abner. He got up into the bows behind me where the following wind would make sure nobody overheard us. "Do you have any idea where we are?" he murmured.

"A sailor's never lost as long as he knows which ocean he's in."

"Thank you for pointing that out," Abner growled. "Do we chance it?"

I shrugged. "Why should this place be any more dangerous than elsewhere?"

It was Abner's turn to shrug. "Silly of me," he said, "but I always like some young eager type to make first contact."

"I'm young," I said, "And my Uncle Hiram is almost as eager as the king."

Abner spat. "Tarshish sucks. Ever consider going into business for yourself?"

"Just as soon as I find a place with a nice hot spring, soft weather, plenty of complaisant white skins to grow my food, and no wild beasts or half-men lurking just outside my walls. And," I added, "plenty of traders with a fresh lot of Egyptian girls every month."

Abner laughed, which was what I'd been hoping for, since

the sea was still rough and I could already hear the sound of surf breaking as we approached shore.

Shore was a hundred cubits high with a tinge of green on top and bare brown earth along the sheer cliffside. From the way the surf was breaking, there had to be a bit of narrow beach ahead that would probably disappear at high tide. Dead ahead were some signs of a notch high up, and directly below that point waves were not breaking quite so briskly.

"Are we going to wreck?" Abner asked.

I wagged a "no" with my finger and signaled aft for the helmsman to turn slightly astarboard. We drew closer to the shore, and I noticed that what I had thought were rocks bobbed around with too much agility for stone. Local pale-faces, I supposed, out fishing in their black-tarred bullhide coracles. As I watched, one man stood, balancing himself athwartships of a coracle that seemed barely big enough to stand on.

He was whiteskinned all right—big red bruise, red sunburned skin, red hair, and a red beard nearly to his waist. Unlike the others, who kept a respectful distance, this fisherman began paddling straight for us.

"Tarshishim?" he hailed. Before anyone could answer, he was clambering aboard.

"Show me an oar and get the hell out of here," he suggested.

"Now why in Sheol should we do anything like that?" Abner protested.

"Suit yourself," the paleface said. "You don't want me to pull an oar for you, maybe you'll enjoy pulling oars for them."

Their sails furled as they rowed into the wind, two black-hulled ships were speeding from the river mouth. Without waiting for orders my steersman had already swung the *Ishtar* halfway about. Men struggled to spill wind from the sail as the old *Ishtar* completed her turn and linen blew backwards, wrapping round the mast and creating a marvelous tangle. As I considered how best to get it down and keep the wind from pushing us backwards toward those two black-hulled ships, I had time to wonder why they didn't just wait for us to come in and dock. It would have been easier. And I also found time to wonder how this redheaded giant had learned to speak such good Phoenician.

Finally the sail was clewed up and men scrambled along the yard, gathering up the last wind-expanded blisters to re-

duce wind resistance. It was the best we could do without chopping the yard down. And if the gods remembered us at all, we might still have use for that slender piece of timber.

An hour later we were a mile farther offshore. The two black-hulled greeters were closer, and I could recognize their lines by now. "Pentekonter," Abner growled, and I knew he'd gotten that right. With fifty oars each, these Greek dispatch boats could probably almost keep up with the *Ishtar*. But from the way they were crowding us, it looked more like we were being driven toward some unseen rock.

Rowing dead into the wind, we were barely making headway. Another hour and the men would be so tired that we'd be driven back to the mouth of that river. One of the pentekonters had slanted so far away that it was turning now. A sail flapped, then filled as it close-reached to intercept us. I had a sudden inspiration.

"Set sail!" I yelled. "Haul it close as you can astarboard."

"We can't hold her," Abner warned. "She'll tear that steering oar right out of our hands."

Maybe. The pentekonter was already in trouble, sail flapping as it pointed too high into the wind. "You men astarboard;

oars straight down and feathered."

As thirty oars on the *Ishtar's* lee side went down like a picket fence into the water, the hull shuddered and shipped water for an instant. Then it righted, and the sail stopped flapping. A moment later we were scooting along faster than any mariner had any right to believe, crossing the pentekonter's bow from alee, leaving her behind downwind and pointing nearly into the wind, in the general direction of Pretannion.

"What in Sheol made you think of that?" Abner asked.

"Never cheat the gods with their beer ration, and once in a while they'll send you a dream."

Abner shook his head musingly. "Wonder how long it'll take those buggers to learn how to do the same thing."

"They can't," I said.

"Why not? Just because they're Greeks doesn't mean they're stupid."

"Their men are chained. Can you imagine them horsing a five-man oar up vertical?"

Abner could not. He grinned.

"What do you suppose happened there?" he asked an hour later when Iberia was barely visible astern and the pentekonters had long since turned back.

I looked down amidships where our redhaired, red-skinned monster was laughing amid a circle of resting oarsmen.

"My name's Tyrker," he said when I beckoned. "And you two will be Hanno and Abner? I'll be happy to join your company."

"Where'd you learn to talk Phoenician like that?" Abner asked.

"Aboard the *Tyrian Moloch*," he said.

I goggled. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a long story."

I had a feeling it would be. The *Tyrian Moloch* had been one of Uncle Hiram's ships.

"I wish I knew the story." The paleface was talking to himself. "Everything was normal; a few storms but nothing worse than usual until we were approaching the straits. Then old Boreas got his chlamys in a twist. Blew us clear out through the Pillars and then veered enough to send us skinning up the Iberian coast dodging shallows all the way. We were halfway to the Tin Islands before it let up."

"Tin Islands?"

"Cassiterides," Abner murmured. "Those rocks at the lower end of Pretannion."

"And then what?" I asked.

"I wish I knew." Tyrker was repeating himself.

Abner looked at him.

"So I drink," the redhaired giant said. "You know us. We all do."

Abner sighed. "And in between drinks?"

It was Tyrker's turn to sigh. "Couple of pirates chased us into the little river."

"But you got away—arrived safely?"

"I guess we must have. I remember a thanksgiving service, and we all drank near as much as we poured out for the gods." Tyrker's jollity had evaporated by now.

"When I woke up, I was in chains—I and everyone else in port. After a while they understood we couldn't do much in chains, so they started letting us work alone. Naturally every fisherman had to leave a wife or children ashore."

"You have a woman then?"

"A lady of the town made an arrangement. As long as I brought her food, she cooked it."

"And now?"

"She's not stupid. Other men would rather work without chains."

I sighed. So Tarshish was no longer welcome in Tyrris Herakles. There was nothing I could do about it now. Someday with two or three more ships we

might go back and give those pirates what for. But before I could do anything for good old Tarshish, I had to do something for not-so-good old Uncle Hiram. Sundown again.

Two hours later I could see the unmoving Phoenician Star and correct my bearings. It was encouraging to note that the wind had not changed direction but continued steady from due west. In the intervening hours we had lashed oars until men no longer had to strain constantly at holding our improvised keel. And the wind held steady for four unbelievable days as we maintained our offing and crept steadily north. The *Ishtar* was pointing higher than I had ever seen her sail into the wind before. If the wind didn't shift . . . but I was already overdrawn with the gods and could not expect too many more favors. Abner appeared and handed me my heavy cloak. As he took over, I crawled under a bench and tried to sleep.

From the position of the stars around the unmoving Phoenician Star I must have slept several hours. There was something different about the *Ishtar's* motion. It took me an instant to realize it was a ground swell. Once more we were in shallow water. Abner

was up in the bows, peering earnestly into the low mist.

"Gods of Shinar!" he breathed. "Pretannion already!"

We made a slight course correction, and I tried to figure why we were so much farther along. Abner might think I was a daring navigator, but I suddenly understood why Uncle Hiram had been so hesitant to let me have a ship.

Creeping along under oars, we came upon a small inlet in the chalk cliffs. The oaks above the shingle beach seemed uninhabited. I hoped so because we were east of the tin traders already. Any palefaces here would have nothing to offer but trouble.

The cove was narrow and led, I supposed, to some river. Tide was at flood, so we beached without much work and set up camp. I had started the brewing ritual when one of our woodcutters came running. He was an easterner, and I sweated blood trying to understand his outlandish accent.

It was just out of sight around a small promontory. Fire had blackened the timbers, but there was no mistaking the lines of a Tarshish ship.

Abner came panting up behind me. "Recognize her?" I asked. Abner pulled his razzled turban off and scratched vigor-

ously. He stood back and studied the blackened skeleton while I poked about in soggy ash and bits of charred wood. My easterner exploded strange syllables and rushed up with a small piece of terra cotta. It was one of those embossed cylinder seals we roll over a tablet.

"I couldn't swear to it," Abner said, "but she might have been the *Sidonian Baal*."

"Sargonid's?"

He nodded.

"Here's his check protector," I said.

So we'd found one of Uncle Hiram's ships. But what had happened? We poked about in the ashes but couldn't find anything in the way of a clue. It was turning dark, so we hurried back.

Our camp was exposed, for we depended on the *Ishtar*. If anything happened, out in the middle of the inlet we'd be beyond range of all but the best of spearmen. The woodcutters were filling crocks and waterskins when we returned. I found a clay bank and had an oven formed. Tomorrow we'd rebake the bread before it molded worse. But tonight I'd post guards.

It rained.

We huddled in armor and wondered if the birdcalls, the hoots, and the occasional thundering crash were caused by

animals, gods, or palefaces. I talked reassuringly to my oarsmen, but it's during nights like this that I sometimes feel I'm not cut out to be a trader.

Morning finally came, and we went about the dreary business of rebuilding the oven and trying to start a fire. My armor was turning green, and the leather straps were mildewed. Even for Pretannion the weather seemed worse than usual.

It was another day before bread was rebaked and the beer worked off. The *Ishtar* was loaded, and we were hoisting anchor when the palefaces finally appeared at the edge of the oaks. This was what I'd been dreading: Abner and I had not had time to drill our hayseeds into an efficient fighting unit.

I passed out the bronze trade knives, and we stood with fixed smiles while they moved slowly toward us across the sand. There were maybe fifty of them. Chestnut braids hung over skin cloaks that ended at armpit level. They wore tight trousers with the hair side out. I'd never seen this kind of paleface before, but probably they were what the amber gatherers called Firbolgs—bag men, because of the pants.

I recalled yarns of how you'd come upon them in the woods,

tootling on reed pipes and capering about in their goatskin trousers. I looked carefully for hooves and saw they had feet just like mine—except whiter, dead white skin like a shark's belly, and eyes as blue as the paint that striped their faces and bare torsos.

A short one stepped forward. A bulge beneath the short cloak suggested it might be a woman. Her face and belly were not painted like the others. Her skin was as dark as my own, and her hair was tangled into tight curls, almost kinks.

"Are you from Tarshish?" she asked.

"Phoenician!" Abner muttered.

I could see all kinds of trouble staring me in the face, but there wasn't much I could do about it. She was Phoenician, so I had to reply. "Are you captive?" I asked.

The girl nodded.

I glanced past her at the timid-appearing band of Firbolgs. "I thought they were harmless."

"These had an unfortunate experience with a Tarshishman a month before we stopped. He was short of rowers."

Who isn't? "Will they sell you?"

The Firbolgs were not as large as the average paleface, nor as well fed as a Phoenician,

but they looked like they could be trained. "Get her afloat," I muttered. Oarsmen leaned imperceptibly on the *Ishtar* until she moved. I held up a string of blue glass beads. "See," I said in pidgin. "These for her."

The tallest Firbolg reached for the beads, but I held them until the darkskinned girl climbed aboard. "You king?" I asked.

The tall paleface nodded ingeniously.

"Me king, too. Want see ship?"

A man I took for the prime minister winked broadly at the way they were fooling us, and the pair climbed aboard. The rest crowded up around the oar frames. "Shove off!" I yelled, vaulting up over the stern. These simple minds had thought they were going to rush us. They jumped back from spears that suddenly bristled over our oar frames. King and prime minister gave outraged roars that stopped as Abner swung his mallets. I felt a fleeting pity, then I remembered what they'd done to Sargonid's ship. And that reminded me of an uncomfortable feeling I had about that cylinder seal.

Keel lashings thrummed as the *Ishtar* caught the first surge of Channel swell. A few minutes later the king and

prime minister came to with knots on their heads as big as Abner's mallets. They gazed forlornly at the receding land, shivered when a dusting of spray came over the bow, and promptly vomited.

"It's good to feel a ship again," the girl said. She stretched luxuriantly in the watery sunlight, and her breasts pushed the short cape out at an absurd angle. "Crazy Firbolgs can't stand the sight of a milk factory," she said, and took off the cape. "You know, in three months not one of them made a pass at me."

She had a skinny, spinsterish air about her, but as I glanced at my oarsmen, I imagined she'd find a brand new set of problems.

The fur cape arced overboard and floated in the *Ishtar's* wake like some waterlogged animal. She stretched again and lay down in the narrow stern. The girl was maybe eighteen—past the first bloom but well shaped from the waist up. Until she took those hairy breeches off I'd have to guess about the rest. I glanced at her breasts and stared. And stared!

"Haven't you ever seen a woman before?" she asked.

I looked forward where Abner was bullying the king and prime minister into place, showing them how to grip an

oar. I'd thought the girl was Phoenician or I wouldn't have picked her up. She was as brown as I. But where the cloak had protected her shoulders from the sun, her skin held a tinge of whiteness. The nipples of her small, perky breasts were pink. "Paleface!" I said.

"Half," she agreed. "So what?"

Here I'd risked my ship to rescue her, and she wasn't even human!

"My name's Hatchi."

"Do you belong to any man?"

She shrugged. "You?"

Now what? She'd be nonpaying cargo all the way. And how much could I get for a half-breed girl in Tarshish? I could just hear Uncle Hiram screaming when he saw a talent and a half of female on the tonnage list. "Start any trouble on my ship and I'll feed you to the Underwater People," I promised.

She gave me a funny look and went forward.

The weather seemed colder than it ought to be as we worked northeast, along the Frisian Islands, past the Weser and the Lavan. I'd been afraid we might have an extra forty days around Lower Thoule but the railway was working, so we chocked the *Ishtar* into a cradle. No ships were coming the opposite way, so we had to load stones into the counterbalance

at each hill. Bullwhackers cursed the oxen. Slaves grunted and smeared water and tallow over smoking rollers, but slowly the *Ishtar* jolted her way across into the Myrtos Sea.

I never got over marveling at the way the ancients had engineered this smooth stone roadbed with its pulleys and counterweights to get ships over the little hills of the isthmus. Only the gods knew how old it was—older than bronze, we all knew, and still it ran whenever these half-wild palefaces stopped feuding long enough to keep twenty-five miles of roadbed in repair.

"They don't build things like they used to," Abner said, and I guessed he was right.

The bullwhacker was a typical northern paleface, a head taller than a Phoenician, with blond hair in twin braids and dressed mostly in skins. But like all these railroaders, he knew the value of an axe. I finally haggled him down to only two, but that was still higher than usual. While I was digging the money out of the chest next to the stern post, I wondered why coinage couldn't be cast in some shape a little easier to carry. But Uncle Hiram had told me time and again that the palefaces were used to Tarshish money and they'd lose confidence if it changed size or



shape. Who knows? Maybe someday somebody will actually cut something with one of those trade axes.

I asked the railroader how many Tarshish ships had crossed this season.

"Six," he answered.

"How many came back?"

He shook his head.

We camped in a siding half-way across, and Abner was as worried as I. A chill wind blew across a bog and made unhappy sounds in the pines. "Notice something?" I asked.

"No mosquitoes," Abner said. "You don't suppose we're going into another ice age?"

"Sacred Ancestor made a deal with the gods when he followed the glaciers up here."

Abner shrugged. "Between gods and women, a man doesn't know what to believe."

Finally I realized what he was talking about. "Is she making trouble?"

"She refuses to perform those duties for which the gods created her."

"With you?"

"With anybody."

She came to sit by the fire. Her hair was shorter and tortured into a saladlike crown with leaves and flowers. She'd begged some oil, which made her breasts glisten in the firelight. There was still a faint line where the Firbolg cloak

had bleached her shoulders. "Tell me again how the Firbolgs got the drop on Sargonid," I said.

"We'd been out two or three months. It seemed like I'd always lived aboard that ship, beaching night after night, making camp, trading, fighting, stealing. There had been a few storms the first month—especially when we came through those narrow headlands where the current is so strong. And once we passed them, it really started to blow."

I supposed she was talking about the Pillars of Herakles. "Would you mind getting on with it?" I asked.

"Finally, just a few days from here, we caught a big storm. That's not just my idea. The men on the ship all said it was the worst they'd ever seen."

"Why didn't they go ashore?"

"I don't know. Maybe the wind was wrong. Anyhow, the men were worn out. Half the oars were broken, and the sails looked like the fringe on a prayer shawl. We'd been out of beer for three days when we finally saw land."

By now I was convinced she was either crazy, a liar, or had no sense of time. On mature reflection I decided it was the latter. None of these palefaces can understand that time is money. They live in a dream world, and

no matter how many times you get their X on a contract, they never deliver on time.

Anyhow, nothing in her story had suggested what happened to the other ships. One storm, I could believe. But where did she get that two or three months to the straits? Two days sounded more like it. Why had they started from one of those little trading posts inside Thallassa in the first place? Some kind of hot cargo and they wanted to avoid customs? Sometimes you could sneak through the straits on a foggy night. But somehow I'd never taken old Sargonid for enough of a bucko to try it.

"What," I finally asked, "is this about you giving the men a bad time?"

She gave me an odd look. "I guess my mother raised me old fashioned."

"Well, I'm old fashioned, too. I don't like trouble on my ship. Either you're friendly with all the men or you'll be friendly with none." I went off to bed down by the cradled *Ishtar*. She was still chattering at Abner when I dozed off.

We reached the Myrtos shore at noon next day and launched again. There was no shipping in this sea, save for a few pale-faces in skin boats who fled at the sight of us. This struck me as odd. Usually they liked to

hang around and trade fish or cranberry pemmican for beads, lying just beyond grabbing distance if they saw any empty places on the rowing benches. So who had been scaring them?

We were in long daylight now, and the shores were changing to that dark and evil bluegreen of the north where no man knows what silent, savage thing lurks behind the next tree.

Hatchi was acting like a woman. With cold weather she'd taken to wearing a boat cloak which draped like an ill-fitting tent and partially concealed the angular muscularities of her body. I couldn't make up my mind whether I liked her better covered or bare. One day she stood behind Abner at the sounding board, and the wind suddenly blew the cloak tight. Several oarsmen missed the beat, and Abner traced their pedigrees in some detail. I stopped daydreaming and gave the steering oar a jerk to get the *Ishtar* back on course. Why would any captain in his right mind have a woman on board?

Day followed day and I fingered Sargonid's cylinder seal absently. The seal was proof that the *Sidonian Baal* was wrecked, and might help Uncle Hiram collect his insurance without the usual waiting period. But that little piece of

terra cotta worried me. A forgery? I fingered it again and decided it was genuine.

The wind grew chillier, and one morning while everybody else dozed I sighted an iceberg. I was skirting it when suddenly I stared straight into the round-eyed earless face of an Underwater Man. His mustache twitched, and he gave me a sneer before slipping noiselessly from the ice into the water. I sheered off. The wind was behind me, and maybe the *Ish-tar* could get well away before he could call his friends. There'd be time enough for fighting if they came back in force. And if they didn't, why frighten my oarsmen? I told Abner about it, though. He looked worried but didn't say anything.

Raw weather and continual salt spray were making sores on the oarsmen's hands. Thighs and buttocks festered no matter how much tallow we smeared on the benches. I decided to stop and brew pine needle beer before we lost our teeth. Then the godless wind veered until I couldn't land. A whole gale drove us for a day and a half; then suddenly we were scooting up a long, narrow inlet.

A steep shingle beach separated us from the forest. The depot seemed much as it had

the last time I saw it: a small palisade of pointed logs with a catwalk inside. Blockhouses overhung the wall, ready to pour a welcome on overeager visitors.

We did not beach, for I had an uncomfortable feeling. Abner glanced at the stockade, and I knew he shared it. He stayed aboard with half the rowers. I took the others, and weapons ready, we crossed the hundred cubits of silent beach.

No beacon fire, no welcoming party, no sign of the six ships. I pounded at the gate with my axe, and it swung open. Fresh water still bubbled from the spring beside the steam bath. We moved cautiously toward the warehouse, a log building with a thatch roof pitched high to shed snow. A damp, mildewed look suggested no fire had been lit for some time.

Curtains were ripped from both ends of the tunnel-like entrance, and the interior of the warehouse was visible in the dim light that came through the smoke hole. A ripe carrion stench came from one corner.

We grunted the *Ishtar* up inside the stockade, and after posting a watch, Abner and I returned to the empty warehouse. Bits of kinky black hair and beard still clung to two skulls.

"Wolves?" Abner asked.

I shook my head. "Wolves go for tender parts like livers and kidneys, but they don't take them out with knives."

"Gods," Abner said. "To think such things go on in our day and age."

"I never knew these pale-faces were cannibals."

"They aren't," Hatchi said indignantly from the doorway.

"What do you know about it?" Then I shrugged. No use bringing that up again.

The goods were spread out to dry, and the men had patched the oven. I started the brewing ritual while Abner took a work party into the dim building.

Three days later our fallen friends squatted, facing east, each with his loaf of bread, an axe to pay his fare, and a beaker of beer in his right hand. While Abner and his men shoveled I fired the hoops. As the last shovelful fell, I rolled their flaming sun-wheels downhill, westward into the sea.

There were no supplies in the depot. We had seed, but it was too late in the season to plant. I wondered where all the pale-faces were, but there was no time to worry about that. The stockade was secure after repairs on the gate. The spring was flowing. All we had to do was find out what had gone wrong. I suspected it would be

some time before we got the goods moving again.

We gathered wild currants and gooseberries. I put pale-face-born men to gathering bark. Hatchi went out with a band of Tarshishim to point out which kinds of birch and poplar were edible, and the difference between a Thoulean and a Boresti pine. Soon tubs of pitch and tar lined the warehouse walls, and the stockade was festooned with drying bark. I put the older men to pounding it to flour.

The Firbolg king and prime minister had learned a smattering of Phoenician by now. As oarsmen they were nothing to write home about, but they showed an aptitude for spotting oysters and whelks. The tides were wrong one morning, so they went bark gathering. When the party came in that afternoon, Hatchi was missing.

"Still a couple of hours of twilight," Abner said. "Want to look for her?"

"Lose ten oarsmen looking for one worthless woman?" I glanced across the clearing into the forest of shadows and said, "We'll look around tomorrow." But as I rolled up in my cloak alongside the still-warm oven, the stockade seemed strangely silent. Why wasn't I relieved to be rid of her incessant chatter? She wasn't goodlooking even

for a paleface. More than ever I wished I'd had a chance to buy one of those nice fat Egyptian girls before my uncle sent me off up here. Abner left the fire and squatted beside me. "Wolves or palefaces?" I asked.

He grinned. "I have another theory, but I don't know whether I should inflate your ego by divulging it."

"She been cooperating?"

Abner shook his head. "Told me some involved story to the effect that she never had and wasn't about to start now. But it's been my experience that this type of woman enjoys being rescued. Especially when young."

"Young! She's eighteen if she's a day. What you mean is she's got her eye on one of my men."

Abner gave me an odd look. "Something like that," he finally said.

I turned over and tried to sleep.

When she did not turn up by midday, I armed a party, king and prime minister invited, and they led me to where they'd lost her yesterday. The king tossed his mane this way and that, then trotted off, bending double as he nosed some invisible spoor. From behind, his naked haunches and their dangling accessories reminded me of a bobtailed greyhound.

He halted suddenly with a "whuff" more hound than human. It was some time before I could coax him back to Phoenician. The Firbolg was frightened. He capered about in a small trampled space, pointing this way and that. "Ogre!" he said, and I wondered what he meant. "Bad!" He raked leaves aside, and I saw a broad-splayed footprint bigger than the Gilgamesh giant's.

"Did he get Hatchi?"

The king nodded. "Two him that way." The king obviously wanted to go the other way.

An oarsman glanced at the tracks and muttered unbelievably. It was Tyrker, the tall, redheaded paleface who'd joined us just off the Iberian coast.

"A bear?" I asked.

He rolled bead-blue eyes and called on unknown gods. I wondered what "Nibelung" meant, but he wasn't talking. When we crossed a mud creek bank, it became obvious that this animal walked on two feet. I thought of the knifemarks on the Tarshishim we'd buried. What kind of animal can chip flint? I recalled Uncle Hiram's warnings about Centaurs. But this wasn't Centaur work; no hoofmarks or arrows.

We came out of the tall shadows, through low scrub timber to a meadow, and the Firbolg

gave another low "whuff." I saw things poking about on the other side of the grass. I strained and squinted through the haze for more than a blur of things that hunched along like a straits ape. But these were larger. As I watched, one stood up and walked as erect as any man.

We had axes and javelins—and the trade knives we always carry. "Can we take them?" I asked.

The Firbolg looked at me as if I were insane. Then he got a sudden grip on himself. "Tarshishman do anything," he shrugged.

"What do you say?" I asked Tyrker.

"If we can catch 'em."

The meadow was a thousand cubits across and perhaps twice that long. "Take six men," I told him. He nodded and began moving as I started in the opposite direction. We were halfway round before I realized my mistake. If they could smell, Tyrker would spook them before I was close enough. Dodging from tree to tree, we came within a hundred cubits and squatted behind a log, waiting for the redhaired giant to bring up his people.

The animals were big, heavier than a blond paleface and, stretched out, would have been nearly as tall. But they

crouched like an ape, and their arms were longer than a man's. Sparse reddish hair covered the males' shoulders and chests and ran down in a bristling line, terminating in a tuft that nearly concealed their masculinity. Both sexes had long yellow hair that streamed in a tangled mass from their skulls. This convinced me, even more than the flints they carried, that they were not apes. Uglier than usual they might be, but these things were palefaces.

I remembered the picture on a Tarshish beer-joint crock—the gorillalike things I'd thought were gods. Whoever made that crock had seen these things. They poked along, moving slowly toward us. The big male grunted mightily as he strained at a rotten log. Two females joined him, and they turned it over. Females and cubs made eager clucking sounds as they scrabbled for beetles. The boss male sucked a snail from its shell while half-grown bucks watched from a safe distance and perhaps dreamed of a day when they'd be bigger and the boss older. But the old fellow's stiff beard betrayed no gray. It would take a long fang to reach that throat.

Minutes passed and there was no sign of Tyrker. I wondered what was keeping him.

Suddenly there was a "whuff" surprisingly like my Firbolg's, and the male stood upright, his little eyes glaring suspiciously. And still no sign of Tyrker!

The old boy made sounds that might have been language. His subjects scurried away while he stood rear guard, baring teeth and making threatening gestures. I stood and threw my javelin. Six others followed it. We shifted axes to the fighting hand.

His long arms plucked at the shafts. Little eyes glared at us, and he gave a final coughing grunt. The young males could decide amongst themselves who got the biggest snails now.

We wiped our spears and studied the still form. I would have liked to skin him, but we had more pressing matters. Where in Sheol was Tyrker? We had nearly circled the meadow before we found him.

At the base of a slender pine lay an ogre—as the Firbolg called them. He was younger than the one we'd killed, his beard ruff less bushy. I wondered what he'd intended to do with Hatchi.

"Eat um!" the Firbolg assured me.

But I remembered how the old boy had monopolized all the females and wondered if the young ogre had not had something else in mind. There were

marks at the base of the tree where he'd been chipping away with his flint. I wondered how Hatchi had managed the ten cubits up to the nearest branch.

"You know," Tyrker said reflectively, "back in Neanderthal the old folks told stories about Nibelungen, but I thought they'd all been killed off."

"Get me down out of here!" Hatchi screamed.

I glanced up again. She was naked from the waist up but still wore hairy Firbolg trousers. I grinned at a sudden thought.

"What's so funny?" Hatchi shrilled.

I was thinking about the young ogre with no way of knowing that goatskin didn't grow on her.

I could think of no dignified way to get the girl out of the slender tree. There was a general feeling that we'd wasted too much time on her already. Before we'd gone a hundred cubits she'd stopped squalling and caught up, panting and too out of breath for chatter.

That night I filled Abner in. The Teuton had told conflicting stories about Nibelungen, and I was convinced his people's knowledge had long since retreated into legend. The Firbolg was more explicit. "Bad,"



he said: "Live in hole. Make fire. Catch Firbolg. Eat um!"

Those I'd seen didn't look smart enough to build a fire. But with those long arms they'd sure make oarsmen. "Think we can break them?"

Abner shrugged. "The question is, have they got enough brain to gather amber?"

I sighed. Amber was what we came for—that congealed sun sweat that washed up along these Myrtos shores. A small piece of it was worth a talent of copper. Without foreign exchange to buy Cyprus copper, Tarshish would go under. But we couldn't get amber without palefaces, and ours had all disappeared.

Hatchi avoided me. I was happy for the peace and quiet; but I wondered why. She squatted near Tyrker and his friends, who laughed uproariously while she pantomimed the amatorial advances of something not quite human. I studied her lithe body in the firelight and wondered if it was some trick of shadow that made her appear darker. From some angles she looked almost Egyptian. "You suppose she's got her eye on that German?" I asked.

Abner gazed at me for a long moment. "I couldn't say," he finally shrugged.

So far there'd been no fights among the oarsmen. I crossed my fingers.

The short northern summer was passing. These forests were usually teeming with food, but the reindeer had disappeared along with their owners and other game was equally lacking in our snares and pitfalls. I wondered if the climate was really changing. It seemed rawer than usual. Even through the hottest part of the summer it rained one day out of two. Then came days of rain until I wondered if the *Ishtar* was going to float out the gate. The fjord became roiled and muddy from the river somewhere east of us. Two days after the rain stopped, the Firbolgs came running from their oyster beds. I went and saw flecks of silver in the fjord. Salmon were running!

We had no nets, and the fjord was too wide anyway. "Can you hold her with ten men?" I asked.

Abner surveyed the stockade thoughtfully. The blockhouses were in repair now, and the palisade had been reinforced. "Twelve," he said. Abner was older and seemed to have a way with women, so I left him Hatchi, too. The rest of us rowed all one day to the head of the fjord.

We were well upriver before the tide changed and rowing became impossible. We towed the *Ishtar*, looking for a rapids.



Two days of grunting and heaving on the towlines passed before we found one. Beside it was a single pile of ashes.

We studied the rain-washed ashes, poking at bits of burnt bronze and pottery shards. The oarsmen found a cylinder seal, and that cinched it. I'd seen Uncle Hiram authorize cash vouchers against that seal too many times to mistake it. I juggled it with the little terra cotta cylinder I'd found in Pretanion and decided neither was a forgery. But why? What had happened here? And where were the other five ships? We were a sober and silent lot as I sacrificed and started the brewing ritual.

Oarsmen started repairing the drying racks and cutting spears. Someone had already rolled logs into the channel at this point and built a woven sapling bridge over the narrowed flow. We had been finishing for three days, working frantically amid scales and the stench of offal that had somehow missed being thrown back into the river. I was superintending construction of another drying rack when we heard an uproar from the fishing bridge. I supposed it was another bear trying to muscle in, but when I got there, the oarsmen held a struggling paleface.

He was a typical northerner with long blond hair and blue eyes—like half the men in my crew. "Came floating down in a skin boat," an oarsman said. "We snagged him as he came toward the bridge."

The paleface ceased struggling and regarded me with the despair of one who knows himself already dead. "Tarshishim sick," he said. "Touch man; man die."

*Aha!*

So at last I knew what had happened. I couldn't imagine those bumbling ogres getting the drop on a Tarshishin—or even a paleface. But if men were dead or dying... Once again I was thankful I'd never watered the beer. You can mock the gods just so long. Then some night a black mist comes creeping up out of the swamp...

"Look around," I told the paleface. "See anybody who looks sick?"

The paleface ate with the appetite of a man newly reprieved from the dead. At length he emitted a tremendous belch and commenced picking his teeth with a fishbone. The tame natives who had survived the epidemic, he told us, had moved on to where the gods might be less angry. He insisted that some dying Tarshishin must have fired the ship, for the pale-

faces had been afraid of the site. Along with the sickness the gods apparently had sent the ogres, for the palefaces had no memory of ever seeing them before.

"How many you?" I asked.

He held up both hands and clenched fists five times.

"That just men or everybody?"

He made an all-encompassing gesture.

Their upriver camp was bleak and unfriendly. The gods were strangers, and his people could not get the hang of getting along with river spirits. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been swept down to us. They were living in a constant state of jitters from the ogres, who'd steal any unguarded woman or child. Only this paleface called them "trolls."

"How you fixed for winter?"

"Some fish. Not enough."

"Want to come back to the stockade?"

He thought a moment. "Tarshish no make sick?"

I decided to pour out an extra pot of beer the next morning.

"How far your people?"

He held up one finger and made the sun sign.

"You tellem we fish here. Bimeby everybody go to stockade." I gave him a few strips of dried salmon, and he trotted off upriver.

Three days later a hungry, pockmarked band straggled in. For a while I thought they'd eat faster than we could catch fish, but soon their women turned to with the gutting and we built still more racks. The weather improved a little after the big storm, so the only troubles we had drying the fish were the thieving crows and gulls, and the rats that were created from piles of decaying offal.

It was hard to keep dates this far north, but I knew the autumn equinox couldn't be more than days away. For all the help we'd gotten from the gods lately I'd just as soon have forgotten the whole business but . . . the trouble with any kind of god business is, no matter how bad things are, they can usually find some way to make things worse. I began running it over in my mind, trying to remember the chants and prayers that would keep the divine bastards off my back for another three months, until winter solstice. Damn all gods anyway! It made me furious to have to waste a day right in the middle of the salmon run. In the end I compromised. My own men sacrificed, and the palefaces, who had other gods anyway, went on fishing.

The spawning season seldom lasts over a month, but it was no coincidence that it ended

abruptly next morning. Since there were no more fish, I called a halt and did what I could to patch things up. I'd get even with the gods if I ever got back to Tarshish.

The simple way to get down to the stockade would be to load the *Ishtar* and row down the fjord, leaving the palefaces to walk around. But I couldn't fancy any paleface trusting us that far. If I left part of the catch behind, they might decide they'd be happier away from the stockade. And if a band of trolls showed up meanwhile . . .

We built a raft. I loaded the *Ishtar* and picked a dozen of the strongest palefaces. The rest went aboard the raft along with the women and children, who could stand a wetting better than the half-dried fish.

Towing against the tide was impossible, but we made the stockade in three days of alternate drifting and anchoring. I was afraid my equinoctial bungle might have gotten Abner in trouble with the gods, but he reported business as usual and his men had pounded most of the bark into flour. Now we had another problem.

Tarshish traders have learned never to let more than a half-dozen palefaces at a time into a stockade, especially if they've earned enough to buy a

crock of religion. But with those ogres around, the palefaces couldn't live outside. And I didn't want them ever to get an idea like building a stockade of their own. I talked it over with Abner.

"They can check their weapons at the gate," he said, "but what about their smell?"

"Maybe we could build them some lean-tos inside the wall. We could move into the warehouse. Have to soon anyway the way it's turning cold." I was thankful these palefaces didn't raise cattle. I could still remember the stench of those one room house-barns around the Rine stockade.

Our palefaces smeared mud over woven willows and topped off with thatch. Leaves turned yellow, and as I reluctantly switched my kilt for native dress, I wondered how the ogres would make out in cold weather.

Even behind the headland that sheltered us from the Myrtos's fury, wind howled unmercifully, and there was a trace of salt in the air. We sat in the stockade and shivered. I would have cursed the weather if we hadn't needed it so badly.

Three days later the wind subsided, and whitecaps disappeared from the fjord. "Time to earn your keep," I said, but the palefaces were way ahead of

me. With dawn the whole clan had trooped out to pick among the newly tossed up pebbles for those drops of sun sweat that meant life to Tarshish.

An old paleface once told me he thought amber was only pitch which had undergone a hardening with age, like a beer priest's liver. But congealed sun sweat sounds more expensive when Greeks and Egyptians fight to trade their gold and copper for it.

The storm had been a good one. My palefaces brought in nearly a tenth of a talent—half of it in one magnificent piece as big as a man's fist. I began the brewing ritual, and next day we paid off. Though I'd never water the gods' beer, I did not hesitate to cut my palefaces'. Things were tough enough without any war god visions inside the stockade.

Hatchi had gotten over her huff and was making my life miserable again. She seemed to be rounding out a little. Or was I only imagining it? One morning when I was nearly through chanting roll call of the seventy-two beer gods she interrupted me. I forgot my place and had to start all over again. When I'd finished, I ran her into a stockade corner. At the last minute I refrained from fracturing her. After all, it was partly my fault.

"Look," I said, "I told you I'd fix you up as soon as we reached the depot. Now don't blame me if your idiotic conduct has scared all the men away. If you really need one, tell me which pleases you, and I'll detail him to give you a few lumps or whatever else it'll take to quiet you down."

Hatchi got a sudden look as if her breakfast had gone down wrong. She started hanging around Abner, and I wondered if that was where her desire lay. But my oarmaster's beard split into an even wider grin. For some idiotic reason he was amused by the whole situation. Maybe I could have seen the funny side, too, if I hadn't had to worry about getting the *Ish-tar* back to Tarshish with something to show for the months we'd spent in this miserable hole. The amber collected so far wouldn't begin to pay the docking fees.

Hatchi still wore those tight goatskin pants instead of the paleface garb we all wore now. I hated the shapeless tube that ran from knees to armpits, so heavy it had to be held up with shoulder straps, but it and the fur cloak were the only things that kept us from freezing. I longed for spring and Tarshish.

It snowed during the night, and I pitied the palefaces as they scrabbled among surf-

washed pebbles. I was standing by the open gate watching them disappear over the ridge when Abner called me. I recognized the splayed footprints immediately.

"Barefoot in this snow!" Abner breathed.

And too close to the stockade to suit me!

If the ogres were going to patrol the walls, we'd have to do something. I didn't consider them much of a threat, but they'd spook the palefaces and make it impossible to get any work done.

The rill that flowed from our spring was already rimmed with ice. I didn't relish the thought of chasing ogres through waist-deep snow.

"What about poison?" Abner asked.

"Monkeys are too smart."

"Monkeys don't eat meat," he countered.

Come to think of it, they don't. I wondered if these animals might be human—as much, at least, as palefaces.

There was no hemlock, but Abner found nightshade and toadstools where pines kept the ground free of snow. We boiled down an essence, keeping carefully upwind of the vapors, and I stewed a mangy paleface dog in it. We had no tiger whiskers, so I chopped the dog's into short pieces and mixed them into the

stew. I studied the concoction awhile, still not satisfied.

Abner went into the warehouse and returned with a fistful of cheap, off-color beads. He ground the glass into powder and sifted it over the stew. We set baits out around the stockade. There were no dead ogres next morning, but we had some mighty sick amber pickers.

Those who could navigate went to the beach again. Our oarsmen kept to the warehouse and tossed knuckle bones, waiting for winter to end. I decided I'd better write a report. I made a tablet and sharpened a stylus. I'd gotten the list of evidence for the insurance examiners and was rolling the two cylinder seals into the clay when Abner came in. He glanced at Sargonid's mark and grew thoughtful. He picked up the terra cotta cylinder and hefted it. We looked at each other and the same thought struck us.

"Gods of Shinar!" Abner breathed. "What was he doing clear up here?"

I drew a deep breath. Sargonid had never sailed the Myrtos routes. That was what I'd been trying to fit into place. He was an easterner—Thalassa and Pontos Axeinos runs. He must have been nearing Tarshish when the big storm drove him north. The Ishtar

had cast off a week later, and the tag end of that same blow had shortened our run to Pretannion most miraculously.

Suddenly I recalled what Hatchi had said. All that time through a stormy sea, and then a narrow place where the current ran strong. Sheol! She wasn't talking about the sunny Thalassa and the twin Pillars of Herakles. She was talking about the long dismal passage from the land of the Amazons way up in the Pontos Axeinos and down through the Bosphorus and the Hellespont. Making allowances for her time scale, Sargonid must've been heading for Tarshish when the big blow swept him on past, up the coast along my own route to Pretannion.

But Sargonid was an easterner, not used to the ways of the wild Ocean. No wonder he'd gotten the worst of it in a blow.

And he'd been carrying the paleface girl the king was waiting for—the one somebody was supposed to impregnate with a half-breed prince to smooth out trade relations up in the Pontos Axeinos area. So near and yet so far . . . If she'd known when to jump overboard she could practically have swum to Tarshish. "Do you suppose Hatchi's the missing merchandise?" I asked.

"She's built about right for it," Abner agreed. "You know the Pontos Axeinos is Amazon country. But why didn't she tell us?"

"Why didn't I ask her? We could have turned around and gone home from Pretannion!"

Amber was coming in too slowly to make expenses. Of course, we might be able to pick up a little tin on the way back past the Cassiterides. But if Hatchi was who I thought she was, Uncle Hiram could save his charter, and the king would be off our backs for a while.

There was skim ice in the fjord already. I'd been gambling on one more storm so we could get at least enough amber to pay our docking fees before freezeup. If we didn't get out before then, we'd be stuck here until spring. But now . . . "All hands start loading," I yelled. "We're going home!"

The stockade was a jumble of organized confusion when our palefaces came stampeding back. "Trolls!" their headman babbled. "Kill mans. Take womans. Got pants woman, too!"

"What in Sheol was Hatchi doing out there?" I roared.

"Maybe she wanted to earn her keep," Abner said.

I suppose I could have been more pleasant to her. If only she hadn't talked so much.

"How did it happen?" I asked the paleface.

"Come from woods. Us on beach."

"Couldn't you drive them off with rocks?"

"Got axe and spear."

I looked at Abner. These ogres must be smarter than I'd thought. I wondered if we could do business with them. The palefaces insisted it was impossible. They had tried, but the ogres accepted neither treaty nor tribute. I wondered where they'd come from. With Centaurs moving out of the east, only the gods knew how many peoples they were pushing like a bow wave ahead of them. How long before we had to worry about Centaurs, too?

But mainly I wondered if we could get Hatchi back before they ate her. Of all the lousy luck! Why couldn't I have found out how valuable she was a day earlier?

The paleface was still waiting. "We'll figure out something," I reassured him. But what? We didn't know where the ogres hung out, and we couldn't chase around looking for them in all that snow.

Abner gazed at me with agonized eyes. "Worth her weight in amber," he moaned, "and they'll eat her just like any other paleface. Wait till your

Uncle Hiram hears the good news!"

"Uncle Hiram! What do you think the king will have to say? If you'll excuse me, I think I'll go fall on my axe."

"Wait," Abner said, "there must be something we can do. How about a trap?"

"Trap, shmap. You think we're after mice?" How in Sheol are we going to build a trap?

Abner shrugged. "You got a better idea?"

I thought a while and decided I didn't.

What could we lose? The ground wasn't too frozen for digging. We dug. Not a pitfall, just a ramp so one walked through the gate along a trench to another gate. When it was ready we walled the trench with sharpened stakes and left the gate open. I told the palefaces to act sick, but it sounded just like the singing that went on every night.

When the gate had stood open a while, three young males peered cautiously inside. We watched through peepholes as they sniffed the delectable odors of rotting salmon. Just as I was sure we had them hooked, they turned and went humping off into the forest. "They'll be back," Abner promised.

He was right. In less than an hour more came. They were the same things we had killed last



summer: naked, with shambling, fuzzy bodies and yellow manes. But this time they didn't carry stone celts. Their axes were chipped sharp and bound to handles. They had flint-head spears. I wondered if those of last summer were a different clan or just out for a picnic without weapons.

We held our breaths while they moved toward the gate, wrinkling noses at the smell of our bait. Finally they came shambling down the narrow trench toward the second gate. "Now!" I yelled, and both gates slammed shut. I'd hoped to save a few and see if they had enough brains to answer questions, but I hadn't counted on our palefaces.

The males went about their extermination in businesslike fashion. The females and children were more messy. I wondered if the shambling things in the trench could be worse.

Then abruptly a tremendous gabbling wail broke out. "I think we're in trouble," Abner yelled.

I looked over the palisade and was inclined to agree. A wave of ogres came loping out of the forest, clearing the snow in clumsy looking but incredibly swift leaps. They outnumbered us two to one, and some of them were dragging poles.

Our palefaces spread about the catwalk with lances. My men prodded fires and readied hoops on the blockhouse platforms. Uncontrollable as usual, the palefaces were throwing stones and making too much noise, wasting ammunition before the ogres even got in range. A moment later the ogres arrived and placed their scaling poles against the blockhouses where disciplined Tarshishim waited out of sight.

An ogre loped up a pole, his long arms carrying him faster than I'd expected. I pulled a tarred hoop from the fire and quoited the flaming ring neatly over his head. He howled and fell backward. Two more poles slammed against the blockhouse. We played ring toss until we were out of hoops, then my oarsmen went to the pitch pots with ladles, sticks, and anything else that would serve as a torch to hold the sticky stuff and leave a gob of it burning wherever it was poked in some ogre's face. We were running low on fuel, and I was wondering if they'd ever stop coming at us with those scaling poles, when abruptly it was over. Palefaces went streaming out the gate after the retreating ogres. I went out after the palefaces and pulled the headman off a still-bleating troll he was slicing. But it died,



so I still had nobody to question.

This one had a leather waistband, which made him technically less naked than the others. I turned him over. The waistband had a bronze Tarshish buckle.

I left the men to watch the store while Abner and I took out after our palefaces. The trail was practically a road from the number of feet that had beaten the snow down coming and going. I thanked the gods that the Myrtos weather was on its best behavior for once. The sun danced on snow and created dazzling halos about the icicles that drooped from heavy-laden pines.

All that morning we followed the packed, blood-tinged trail across the frozen creekbed, across the now white meadow where I'd killed my first ogre, to a steep bank above a lake. Then I saw it was not a lake. We had passed clear across the headland to another bay north of the stockade's fjord. Halfway up the bank a fire smoked.

We climbed the bank up a narrow trail and saw that behind the small mountain of ashes, charred bones, and garbage was a cave mouth. I wondered if we could save a cub. Maybe they could be trained. Also, I wondered melancholi-

cally if there'd be enough left of Hatchi to recognize.

Our palefaces boiled out of the cave, dragging bloody ogres, clubbing savagely at those who still moved. One carried the upper half of a female. She had been one of our amber pickers, and the paleface who carried her was weeping.

Another female burst from the cave. It was Hatchi—and very much alive. "Hanno!" she shrieked. The goatskin trousers clinched in a scissors that deflated me. "You came for me!" she babbled. "You did come!"

It must have been the excitement or maybe the gods just wanted to play a joke on me. I caught myself saying things no man in his right mind would ever say to a woman. By the time I could clamp my mouth shut, I was afraid it might be too late. I offered silent prayers that Hatchi had been too excited to hear me. She stumbled along in a kind of daze, so I guessed the gods would be kind to me just this once.

Abner pointed below us to where waves broke sluggishly against the rocks. There was a litter of shattered planking above the tide marks, and a well-worn trail led from it to the cave mouth. "That's not driftwood," I said.

"No," Abner agreed grimly.

I snatched a torch from a paleface who paraded about happily, swinging a head by its tangled blond hair. Abner and I lined the palefaces up and inspected the loot they'd ransacked from the fetid cave. Odds and ends of trade goods could have been looted from the stockade. Then Abner came up with three cylinder seals, and that clinched it. At last we knew what had happened to the rest of Uncle Hiram's missing ships.

"But I still don't get it," Abner said. "Howling savages, barely down from the trees, and they took five Tarshish ships one after another?"

It was beyond me. Then suddenly I understood, and then I felt sorry for the simple brutes in spite of all the damage they had done us. They'd had the rarest kind of good luck. And what had their good luck brought them? "Come outside," I told Abner, "down to the beach where the ships wrecked."

He followed me, and we stood staring up at the cave entrance where the cooking fire still smoked. "Gods of Shinar!" Abner breathed.

With the beacon fire gone out at our stockade after the Egyptian sickness had killed everybody, it would have been all too easy in stormy weather to miscount the number of headlands.

Even the best navigator would go on at least to the next inlet before turning back. And there waiting would be the familiar fire and smoke.

And the unfamiliar rocks.

"Never even knew what they were doing," Amber mused. "That fire lured ship after ship on the rocks while they thanked some irresponsible god who kept bringing them trinkets and Tarshishim to eat."

It shook me.

It was cold that night, and the Phoenician Star glittered high and unmoving over a curtain of northern lights. It was going to be close, but I thought we'd be able to get out before the big freeze. I sat a long time in the steam bath, soaking the blood and sweat and cave smell away. When I went back, the carpenter was lashing poles and hanging a curtain of bark cloth around my bed. "What's going on here?" I demanded.

"Nice and warm this way, skipper, and kind of private-like."

"Now he thinks of it, when we sail in the morning. And when did I ever give a flatulation for privacy anyway?"

Abner's evil face split into a grin, and he pointed. Hatchi was scrubbing herself on the far side of the warehouse. She'd shed the breeches, and I had to

admit her long, straight legs were not bad. While I watched she oiled her breasts and combed her hair down loose until it surrounded her like a black cloud. She seemed less skinny, and her shoulders were no longer white. I squinted through the smoke inside the warehouse, and as she swayed toward me, I could have sworn she'd just stepped out of Assurbanipal's load of Egyptian girls.

"I don't know if I ever told you," she said, "but where I come from, a girl likes to pick her own teacher." She turned and walked slowly away.

"You may remember," Abner pointed out, "that the king and your Uncle Hiram were looking for a pigeon."

As Hatchi crossed the warehouse and stepped into the newly prepared compartment, Abner grinned. "Looks like you're the pigeon," he said.

# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the May issue.*

The superintendent waited until Detective O'Doule seated himself comfortably. He even offered him a cigar—one of his finest—delaying the dread news as long as possible. But finally, after the two old associates had lighted the panatelas and created a pleasant blue haze above their heads, Superintendent Blakely braced himself and announced, "Mike, I'm sending you to Westchester College."

O'Doule paled and sputtered, "B-b-but, Blake—old friend—it's been many a year since I sat in a classroom and—"

"No, no," his superior quickly interrupted, "nothing like that. It's drugs—cocaine, to be specific. Suddenly it has become available all over the little town of Westchester and on the college campus. The mayor, the police chief, and college officials are baffled and have asked our help."

"A-a-ah," Detective O'Doule heaved a great sigh. "I thought it was somethin' dreadful. I think with a few assistants I can root out the pusher and get to the bottom of their little problem."

"Er... ah... Mike, that's what I wanted to tell you. The only men I can spare just now are the three new recruits—Harrington, Warington, and Barrington."

O'Doule choked on his cigar. His face turned purple, and the superintendent feared he was having a coronary. "I know how you feel about them," he sympathized, "but they're all that's available. Please bear with me on this one."

"Them—them idiots!" exploded Mike. "They think they're super spies. Go around calling each other 'X,' 'Y,' and 'Z.' I can't remember which is which, but I think Harrington is 'X.' Oh hell, I suppose I gotta do it. Any suspects uncovered out there in Westchester?"

Superintendent Blakely was relieved that the crisis had passed. "They think it's someone new on campus. That includes a new professor hired this year, three transfer students (a sophomore, a junior, and a senior), and a freshman. Those five have acted

suspiciously since coming to Westchester. Each is interested in a different subject and has taken a room on a different street—one is on Elm Street. Two of them are young women, striking beauties according to all reports.”

“Beauties, y’re sayin’,” snorted O’Doule sarcastically. “and y’re sendin’ me there with X, Y, and Z? Maybe drugs won’t be my only problem on this case.”

“Look at it this way,” said Blakely consolingly. “At least our new recruits can act like students.”

Detective O’Doule drove his own car so as not to attract undue attention. He growled to his three passengers, “You understand what y’er supposed to do?”

“Yes, sir!” they chorused.

“I’m X,” said Harrington. “I’m Y,” said Warrington. “And I am Z,” said Barrington, “and you may place your utmost confidence in our discretion and devotion to the objective.”

The older man snorted. “Just keep a low profile, mix with the students, and report what you pick up. And don’t make a play fer either of them two female suspects.”

“Oh, I shan’t,” promised X. “Nor shall I,” said Y. “And I shall ever be faithful to your command, sir,” declared Z.

(1) The three police recruits returned. X reported, “The three men—Karl, Larry, and Mack—include the sophomore, Mr. Jackson, and the resident on Cedar Street.”

(2) Y said: “That’s right, sir. Of the two female suspects, Olga (she’s the blonde) has to pay out-of-state tuition, but Nora (she’s the striking brunette) pays only the in-state rate.”

(3) “I discovered,” stated Z, “that three are natives of the state—the junior, Helvie, and the one interested in chemistry.”

(4) “Speaking of subjects,” contributed X, “the three specializing in art, biology, and chemistry include the freshman, Iglehof, and the resident on Dogwood Street.”

(5) Y had a sudden need to add, “I found that neither of the two young ladies is interested in dentistry. And Nora’s last name is not Helvie.”

(6) “I’ve investigated where they reside,” said Z. “Those living on Aspen, Birch, and Cedar streets include Feiner, the senior, and the biology student.”

(7) X reported: “The engineering student is in a higher class than either Mack or the student living on Birch Street.”

(8) "By astute surveillance," said Y, "my associate Z and I discovered that the professor regularly counsels Karl and Goldman, both out-of-state students, as well as the art student and the one on Cedar Street."

"Ah," conceded Detective O'Doule, "at least you three have been busy. Perhaps we may yet arrest the culprit who's dealin' the cocaine."

"Oh, sir," said X, "we already have. You see, we got warrants and searched their rooms while the five were in classes. We found a stash of coke in the one on Elm Street."

"And naturally, sir," added Y, "we arrested the pusher after class."

"Would that be all, sir?" inquired Z of the flabbergasted detective.

*Who was the distributor of cocaine in Westchester?*

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See page 139 for the solution to the March puzzle.



## **Mystery Writers of America, Inc.**

### **Attention, All Writers**

In celebration of its 50th Anniversary in 1995, and to lend support and encouragement to the writing of the mystery story, the Mystery Writers of America will be conducting two short story contests - one for professional writers and one for amateur writers - beginning March 1, 1994.

Specific rules and prizes will be announced in a future issue of this magazine, but for now MWA wants to advise all interested writers of a few advance details:

- (1) There will be no entry fee.
- (2) Only one story per entrant will be accepted.
- (3) Lengths of stories are to be from 3500 to 7500 words.
- (4) Professionals will be judged in one category, amateurs in another.
- (5) The contest will run for six months, from March 1st until August 31st of 1994.
- (6) The contest will be open to everyone everywhere (except for certain contest officials).

**Watch for Further News  
of this  
Mystery Writers of America  
Golden Anniversary  
Short Story Contest.**

FICTION

# HARD

by Jeffry Scott



*Illustration by Jim Odbert*

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**L**ately I can't get out of my head what Gran always said: "If it was easy, everybody would be doing it. Then where would we be?" She lived in Brixton—that's South London, to out-of-towners—and ran a street stall over Electric Avenue way, kids' clothes, cheap shoes, that class of gear. Grafted away in all winds and weathers. The old girl meant that as long as other folk didn't want that much aggravation to earn a crust, she'd be in business.

Words to live by—which is a laugh, in my case. Gran was a nice old girl, very religious, and she never had my trade in mind.

The way they go on in books and films and on the telly, you'd think it *was* easy, mind. I'm not much for reading, bar the racing results in the paper, but Mo, my wife, is a telly addict. If it's screen-shaped and flickers a bit, she watches. Sometimes it's all I can do to keep from slinging the bloody set out of the window.

Those crime shows, cops and robbers or whodunits, get right up my nose. One minute an actor is killing another actor, and the next he's getting on with his own life like nothing happened. As for the stuff about hit men, it's damned ridiculous. Believe telly rubbish,

and England is packed with pro killers: blood like ice, nerves of steel . . . and brains of sawdust, the way they carry on.

The idea seems to be that once a bloke has killed for money, he starts growing thicker skin and his heart begins turning to stone. By the time he sees to Number Four, say, it means no more than swatting flies. Which just isn't right.

Take my word, it doesn't get easier. What it gets is worse. And my view is worth heeding because I have been at this game for years. Mo thinks I'm a salesman. It accounts for my varying income, the swings between feast and famine. At least once a year, up pops a contract and I take her somewhere nice, West Indies, Africa, Mexico, and let on I've been raking in the commission or landed a bonus.

I ought to get out of this business. It plays hell with my nerves, and I rarely enjoy a good night's sleep without taking a pill. But by the time it got that bad, I was hooked on money and independence. Nobody tells me what to do, see. They ask, and politely at that. Not to mention paying through the nose.

"Fair enough, you're in order," I go, if they wince at my asking price. Oh yes, they

haven't the bottle to kill their enemy, but they'll try to haggle me down. "You can get someone cheaper," I say, right frank and open about it. "You can also buy yourself a daffy of trouble at bargain rates, botched work and a guy can't wait to share the blame, lay half or more on you if he gets caught. Pay peanuts and you get monkeys, am I right?"

Obviously I can't say, "What you're paying for, mainly, is my nightmares and the ulcer and the way everything can be golden but then for no reason at all, anywhere, pub, club, resort, in bed with my wife, I remember that I'm not like millions of other fellows, I'm different."

Easy? For years now, every time I've pulled a stunt, I've thrown up afterwards. Sleeping pills or no, I lie awake several nights, praying for morning. That's how lightly I take it, Mr. TV Producer. (Insomnia, I tell Mo; sales manager has been cutting up rough—it's stress, babe. Many a true word spoken in lie to keep your old woman quiet.)

But the latest job, the one I just did . . . that was special. Specially terrible, I mean. Enough to make me consider packing the whole thing in. More than consider, damn nearly go for it, quit the trade. Can't afford to retire, but

there's more to life than money. Only I can't think what. The blues will pass, they have before, but all the same . . .

Trouble was, I knew the bloke they told me to get rid of. All right, I'm not being straight. He was by way of being a friend. Even that's a cop-out. He was sort of a father figure, if you must know.

Enwright was his name, Arthur Enwright. I can't think of him as anything but good old Arfer. He is—there I go, he *was*—a right Cockney. Couldn't say Arthur to save his . . . Start again, from his mouth the name came out Arfer, and in the old days he was teased about it, called Arfer Minute or Arfer Pounda Butter. Never worried him, far as I could tell. Arfer could take a joke; he wasn't soft, mark you, just a what-the-hell type of bloke.

It astonished me, the contract being on him. Arfer moved up north in the 1980's. Made his pile, the word was, and wanted to enjoy it where he wasn't known. There were tales that he had a new identity and even got chosen as a magistrate. I never credited the last bit, naturally. You often get such rumors about a villain who goes straight. Though I doubted whether straight came

into it, I assumed Arfer got rich and idle.

Evidently I was wrong—he was still pulling strokes. Had to be, else why put a price on his head? It must have been a hell of a big stroke because they were offering silly money, two or three paydays in one.

Then again I would be earning it, because I had more or less grown up with Arfer. Which was how the work came my way, of course. “Get him relaxed, he’ll be pleased to see a pal,” they said. “It’ll be easy for you.”

You don’t know Arfer, I thought. But nodding away all the while, since these were people you don’t argue with. I took their money. It wasn’t a decision, like okay, the past means nothing, I’ll do the dirty on Arfer. Soon as I started listening, I was in; knowing the name was knowing too much, unless I put him away.

I watched my hand on the end of an arm—mine—take the briefcase after they’d opened and shut the lid to prove it was packed with paper portraits of the queen. For a while I sort of stood outside myself. Thinking: You’ve agreed to have a go at Arfer. With everything you know about him. Everything he did when you were a kid; all you owe him. You’ve got to be sick in the head.

“One more thing,” they said before the minders stood aside and the office door got unlocked again. “That’s a lot of money, and it’s not just for topping the old bastard. We could do that ourselves. We don’t want it looking like murder, is that clear? You’re supposed to be good at that.”

I wondered what Arfer had been doing for them. Done to them, more like. It seemed a safe bet that he hadn’t gone north because he was tired. He was At It again, and same as the old days, he didn’t care who he went up against.

A skewer began twisting in my gut. I didn’t want to think about Arfer, but from then on I had to, night and day until it was over.

I didn’t take their advice about turning up on his doorstep for a reunion. Arfer wasn’t that old, sixtyish I worked out. And he’d never been stupid.

Instead I kept a very low profile when I went up to this place, Braston, on the north-east coast. Population twenty thousand or so. A pier, a fingernail of shingle beach, a few seafront cafes, and an amusement arcade, all closed for the winter.

Luckily, they were extending the amusement arcade, land-

scaping waste ground at the back and setting up new rides. One extra fellow in overalls and leather jacket, hanging around the promenade, wouldn't be noticed.

I slept in the van and ate at service stations on the motorway. It meant a round-trip drive of fifty miles or more every time, but the last thing I needed was some hotel clerk or cafe owner placing me in Braston. Nights, I changed into a good suit and one of those retired army officer topcoats, carried an attaché case and umbrella. Executive walking home from the railway station, needed the exercise, if anyone asked. Not that they did. Never set eyes on a copper in the eighty-three hours I spent in Braston.

By the second day I'd located Arfer in a nice but not lavish bungalow in a quiet street about half a mile from the beach. His name was Slough these days. In the nearest pub (businessman in a strange town, stretching his legs, stops off for a whisky and a chat with the locals) Mr. Slough was admired for his skill at snooker. Changed name, same hobby.

I still didn't know if I could do it. Part of me didn't want to, I'd have sworn. It was like when you're a teenager waiting for a girl. You know she has

stood you up, five more minutes and then to hell with it. An hour later you are still there by the bus stop. As one side of you, blind to logic and deaf to pride, has insisted on from the beginning.

My heart flipped and my stomach churned even considering an attack on Old Arfer. So why was I in Braston, sussing him out, stalking him like an animal that happened to stand on its feet and wear clothes? What did that make me? Pig-sick, for openers.

The third morning, parked opposite the junction of the road from Arfer's place and the one leading to the beach, I couldn't believe it. He was coming out, and on foot. I let him get well ahead before locking the van and setting out after him.

I had forgotten how big he was, even stooping a little these days. Dark overcoat, bowler hat, quite the City gent. Maybe he had an appointment, doctor, solicitor, bank, who knew? If so, he was on his own. Tailing him at all was a risk, and either going indoors with him or waiting outside was too big a one. Villains, I know from being one, develop very sensitive skin across the shoulders. It itches if somebody follows them long enough. Which in

Arfer's case could be minutes, not hours.

But no, he just strolled along the promenade. Not far from the amusement arcade was one of those shrubberies inside Victorian iron railings. It was oval, the promenade splitting around it and merging again.

Arfer took the seaward path and went out of sight. He didn't emerge on the far side. Eventually I wound myself up to take a dekko. I was in a truly terrible state, nauseous, sweating, talking nineteen to the dozen in my head—*Drop this right now. . . . Shut up! . . . You can't do it. . . . Do what? I'm only looking.* Hardly in my right mind, from tension and doubts.

The shrubbery hid the beachfront path from the main bit of the promenade. On this side, the path bulged out above the shingle, a few feet below. There was room for a flagpole, a coin-in-slot telescope on an iron pillar, and a bench.

He was sitting on that bench, Arfer, with his back to me.

There are times when you clench your mind tight shut against memories, debts, arguments, fears, and get on with it. Part of me screamed and whimpered that it was wrong, I shouldn't, but my feet kept moving.

Glance right, glance left, glance out to sea, all clear. I

could still have broken away. If Arfer had heard my rubber soles on the path, if he had looked back, then I would have.

Neither of those things happened. I inhaled and let nearly all of it out and took the little revolver from my pocket and put it up against his temple by the ear and squeezed off a shot before he knew what was going on. After that he didn't know anything.

See what I mean about its not being easy?

Having known him for so long, it was hard, desperately hard. Because it was Arfer who initiated me, trained me to kill, more years back than I want to count. His hunch was that I'd like it, same as he did. I happen to think he was wrong. I am no monster, the devil in disguise. But facts are facts: I have an aptitude. Arfer got that right, bless him. It takes one to know one, they say.

And now I'd had to kill the man who gave me a trade. Knowing how dangerous he could be, artful and wary and vicious with it. Into the bargain, it had to pass as accident or suicide. That's as hard as it gets, in my opinion.

For a start, have you any idea how hard it is, when you're right-handed, to fire a revolver left-handed? In a hurry, but the angle has to be just right for a

self-inflicted wound, close enough to leave powder burns. My hand went at such a weird angle to the wrist that I hurt myself, strained a tendon or something, getting enough pressure on the trigger.

To shoot right-handed I would have had to be alongside or in front of him, and that wasn't on. Let him see me? Old friend or no, the man was a killer. (I didn't waste time searching, but I bet that cut-throat razor was still in his pocket. The old devil loved drawing blood.)

He was wearing gloves, same as me. The black leather fingers of his left hand had to be closed around the butt of the revolver. Then I started a walk-do-not-run back along the promenade. I was home by tea-time: Mo gave me herring roes on toes, my favorite. I'd phoned ahead from Birmingham. She was ever so pleased that the latest sales tour had been brief.

I'd never confessed to Arfer how hard it has always been for me. And getting harder every time.

I mean, the risk makes me shiver. When I take on a job—no, every time the phone rings and it *might* be first step towards a new client—the ulcer gnaws. I consider the laws: not court stuff, but those of averages and diminishing returns. Then there is that proverb of Gran's about any pot getting broken if it goes to the well often enough.

I have never been in prison. It would destroy me. Reason tells me to stop—okay, reason and cowardice—before I get caught. But the money's tasty, and what else am I trained for? Really, you could say Arfer brought it on himself, by starting me off.

Don't test my patience with sermons about him and the others. Survival of the fittest is what it's all about, don't be kidded. What's more, the so-called victims are better off than me. No more worries, pain, fears. I am alive, save pity for me. The way I see it, I am the real victim here.

Remember that, next time you're watching TV hit men. Easy? On the word of a pro, it's a very, very hard thing to do.

FICTION

# **“B” Is for Bee**

**by William Pomidor**



*Illustration by Sallie Gregory*

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“Just a little more to the left—that’s better. Ahhh...” Cal Marley closed her eyes and smiled dreamily as Plato slathered tanning cream across her pale shoulders. The couple were nestled in the shade of a potted palm tree. Nearby, children splashed and pranced in the pool’s crystalline water.

“I still don’t get it, Callie,” her husband sighed. “I mean, don’t you think you’re carrying this a bit too far?”

Ignoring his question, she shifted on the chaise longue and smoothed her butterscotch hair away from her neck. “Right there. Mmmm. I think I’m melting.”

“So is the snow.” Plato glanced up at the skylight twenty stories overhead. It was still squalling outside, but a trickle of gray winter light stole through the windows. As he watched, a pile of wet snow jerked loose, gathering speed as it slid down the skylight to plummet into the parking lot.

The gaggle of children ducked under the water and emerged outside. The Seneca Windsor Hotel featured an enormous three-sided atrium flanking the indoor/outdoor swimming pool. A wide glass panel met the water’s edge, keeping most of the heat inside but allowing swimmers to slide

beneath it, paddle and splash outdoors, and catch snowflakes on their tongues.

None of it made any sense. And here Plato sat, rubbing cocoa butter on his wife’s shoulders to protect her skin from the dull metallic light of an Ohio winter’s day.

“What’s that?” Cal asked, turning her head and squinting at him.

“Hmmm? Oh, nothing.”

“Yeah, right.” She propped her head on an elbow and squeezed his shoulder. “Something’s wrong—you’re muttering again. You always do that when you’re annoyed. You sound like Yosemite Sam.”

“Just—you know.”

Cal groaned ominously. “Plato. You’re not thinking about Antigua again, are you?”

He shrugged.

“We’ve been over that about fifty times now,” she reminded him. “It’s not your fault and it isn’t my fault. It just happened. And besides, the new car’s really nice.”

A Chevette. And not exactly new, either. But better than the old Nova, whose engine block had cracked after Plato had ignored a pinhole leak in a hose and Cal had ignored the “Engine Hot” light. It wasn’t worth fixing, the mechanic had told them. For less money, they could get a good, reliable used



car. Like this Chevette right here. Twenty-one hundred, air, stereo, brand-new left front fender, runs like a top.

It was going to be a second honeymoon. The first one had seemed too short, so he and Cal had promised themselves they'd go back to Antigua again. But before they knew it, they were canceling airline tickets and hotel reservations and staring at a week's vacation in northeastern Ohio in the dead of winter.

For a Chevette.

"Thank goodness Eddy came through," Cal mused. "He's been wonderful. The hotel is lovely. Really, dear, I don't miss it at all."

They wouldn't have had any vacation at all if Eddy Andreas hadn't helped out. Several months ago, Plato had pulled Eddy's mother through a particularly rough stay in the Intensive Care Unit at Seneca General. Eddy was so grateful that he had offered his mother's physician a week's stay at the Seneca Windsor, "on the house."

Plato hadn't planned on cashing in on the offer, but when Mrs. Andreas came to his office for a blood pressure check last week, the nurse had told her all about his troubles. Eddy had called that evening and had been very persistent.

"It's *my* hotel, Dr. Marley," he had said. "Hell, in the winter we're never more than half full anyways."

"Gee, Eddy, I don't know. I mean—"

"Lemme put it to you this way: if you don't come, Mother'll be very upset."

That settled it. As a geriatrician, caring for elderly people, Plato was accustomed to difficult cases and complicated problems. But Mrs. Andreas was far more challenging than most of his patients. He pictured her breaking down in the examining room, tearfully forcing him to eat a dozen of her prune brownies as penance or dragging out her rosary and praying, "Dear Lord, please teach Dr. Marley to relax and not work so hard."

"I know what your problem is," Cal was telling him. She found her page in her book—another Hillerman novel. "You're tense—you just need to relax. Maybe after dinner, we can go out dancing. That'll loosen you up."

Matteo, the hotel's concierge, appeared behind the palm tree. In his starched red uniform trimmed with yellow rope and gold buttons, he looked like a Western Union mascot or a Latin American dictator. He held a telephone in one hand

and a pink slip in the other. "Message for you, Dr. Marley."

"Which Dr. Marley?" Plato asked. Cal, as assistant county coroner and chief of pathology at Seneca General Hospital, had arranged coverage for her routine duties. But she was still available for emergencies and complicated situations. The call was probably from Seneca General—some young pathology assistant hadn't been told that she was on vacation.

"Dr. Plato Marley, sir," Matteo answered. He delivered the note.

Cal scowled at her husband.

It was from his partner, Dan Homewood. Just a telephone number, but a very familiar one. Seneca General's emergency room. He took the phone from Matteo and dialed the number.

"Hullo, Dan? Yeah. You're kidding. Huh. No, I understand. Really, it's no problem. I understand *perfectly*, believe me." He hung up the phone, tried not to meet his wife's flashing brown eyes. "It was Dan—over at the E.R."

"Yesss?" In less than a minute, Cal had grown from a purring kitten to an angry hissing panther. "Don't tell me—it's another delivery."

"I don't do obstetrics any more, remember?" As a family

physician, Plato had spent his share of long days and sleepless nights in the labor and delivery suites at Seneca General. Until rising malpractice rates made obstetrics too expensive. He'd always been more interested in geriatrics, anyway. And he didn't mind the extra sleep.

"One of our patients is in congestive failure, he continued. "Dan wants to admit her, but she won't let him. He—uh—wants me to go over to the hospital and talk to her." Plato gathered his things while he spoke. "It'll just take a minute."

"Sure it will." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "You know, Dan should be able to take care of it himself. He's a geriatrician too, isn't he?"

"Now, Callie—"

"I said I didn't mind canceling the trip to Antigua, and I meant it. I just want to spend time with you." Her voice was low, polite, carefully controlled. Like a blackjack wrapped in velvet. "But if you're going to spend this week working, we might as well pack up our things and go home."

"It's Mrs. Andreas."

Cal opened her mouth, closed it again, and sighed. She slumped back onto the chaise. "Oh."

"I mean, I couldn't exactly say no, could I?"

"I understand."

Plato almost felt guilty; he should have told her who it was. But why should Mrs. Andreas be different from any other patient? "Besides, I can think of quite a few times when you've been called away on emergencies—like the Kristoff case—"

"I said I understand, okay?" She gazed out at the pool, waved her hand at him. "And as for me, everything's taken care of. The other pathologists can handle most things themselves. If they call me, I'll just tell them to go jump in the lake."

Plato leaned over to plant a kiss on her lips. "Okay. Same goes for me—next time Dan calls. We're on vacation."

"Right. And just to make sure you keep your word and get back here, I'll go with you. Just let me finish this chapter; I'll be up to the room in a minute."

Plato almost felt relieved as he walked away. The first day of vacation and he was already getting stir-crazy.

He was standing at the elevators when it happened. Looking back later, his clearest memory was the sound. Nothing but an enormous smacking splash, like someone doing a belly flop from a diving board.

And something else—low and flat, a muffled clang.

Except that the Seneca Windsor didn't have a diving board; the deepest part of the pool had only five feet of water. Could some idiot—

He rushed back toward the pool.

Cal was treading water, dragging a sodden form to its edge. At five feet two inches tall, she couldn't walk on the bottom and retrieve the victim at the same time. Panting, she dragged herself onto the ledge, then reached down and was struggling to pull the body closer to the side when Plato got there.

"I think he's past resuscitating," she murmured, watching her husband pull the man onto the tile. "His head hit the ladder just when he—"

Plato wasn't listening. The man's eyes were open, bulging. Streaks of gray in his bedraggled mustache matched those at his temples. Even dripping with water, his haircut and navy blue suit looked elegant. Plato dragged the wide silk tie free, cocked the head into the right position, and opened the mouth to check the airway. A hand jerked roughly at his shoulder.

"Move aside—I know CPR."

Plato looked up. Standing behind him was a strong argu-

ment for tight regulation of men's swimming suits. Though no taller than Cal, the man easily weighed three hundred pounds. Most of it was visible; he wore a tiny electric green bikini suit that would have made a Chippendale blush.

Plato stared blankly at the mountain of pale naked flesh. "Uh—uh—"

The stranger pushed him away from the body, knelt down, and began compressions—far too hard. Plato swore he heard a rib crack. He wondered where the man had learned his technique—most likely from a television show. He recovered his voice. "Hold on a second. You're pressing far too hard."

"Nonsense." The man continued compressions. But when he tipped the head to deliver a breath, he balked.

Plato squatted beside the body and blew into the open mouth. Or tried to. It was like blowing into one of those impossible balloons, the kind that seem to be made from old steel belted tires. He probed with his fingers, but the airway wasn't obstructed. He tried again but failed miserably.

"I wouldn't bother, Plato." Cal squatted by the victim's head. She pointed to the back of the skull, the occiput. It was crushed, staved in. The Chip-

pendale stopped his compressions when he saw Plato sit back on his heels.

"His skull's crushed from the fall," Plato explained. "We're not doing him any good."

"Thirteen stories he fell, at least." Matteo stood near the feet, an awed expression on his face, contemplating the balconies lining the atrium. He seemed to be counting. "I heard something. I looked up and saw him coming over the edge, falling, falling—"

"This is terrible." The fat man's voice was a pinched squeal, but oddly emotionless. Like a giant hamster reading a weather report. "Someone will have to tell Natalie." He rose to his feet, padded off through the crowd.

"That was Mr. Edmundson," Matteo explained. "He's this man's partner. Was." He rushed off to help the paramedics drag their cart around the pool. Quickly, efficiently, the body was loaded onto the cart and carried off to the door.

"I couldn't get any air in at all," Plato told his wife. "Maybe he choked on something."

A pair of policemen strode into the atrium, and the crowd that had gathered dispersed almost instantly. One of the cops recognized Cal and trotted over. He flashed a wide smile.

"Dr. Marley. Did you see anything?"

"Not much," Cal replied. "I'm going over to the hospital now with my husband. But I'll write up a statement and stop by the station later."

"Was he pushed?" The younger cop frowned earnestly.

Cal shook her head, squinted up at the tiers of balconies converging at the sun roof. "Those railings look awfully low. He could just as easily have fallen. My husband thinks he might have been choking."

She took Plato's hand, guided him over to the glass atrium elevator. As they rose, he watched the pool fade to a blue-backed playing card beneath their feet. "So. The other pathologists are covering for you, right?"

"Right."

"You'll just tell them to jump in the lake, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"We're on vacation, right?"

"You got it."

But Plato knew better.

"—and then my son told me that he had an argument with his wife the other day and she said I shouldn't have that corner room at the Windsor any more—wait—wait—" Mrs. Andreas held one quivering hand over her chest and the other in the air, to stall any interrup-

tions. She dragged a deep breath and continued. "You know, the one with the balcony looking out over the pool. There are also windows that face outside; I can see the old Slade Building on a clear day. I just love that room, and I couldn't bear it if—wait—wait—"

Mrs. Andreas wondered why she got breathless when she talked. She thought it was her blood pressure medication. Plato sat patiently in the vinyl chair and waited for her to wind down. They had finally gotten her settled in a hospital bed in the geriatrics ward. She looked more comfortable already. Lasix and digoxin had been given intravenously, her breathing rate had decreased (when she wasn't talking), and a green nasal cannula delivering oxygen straddled her seamed and shrunken face. It was getting to be a permanent fixture there; Mrs. Andreas had been hospitalized so often lately that her upper lip bore a permanent crease from the tubing.

Her hand finally dropped to the bed. "Oh, Dr. Marley. I just don't know what I'd do without you. Are you enjoying your vacation?"

"Very much. The hotel is beautiful—I think your son gave us the Presidential Suite or something. Our room is

enormous." Plato glanced at the vital signs hanging from a clipboard at the foot of the bed. He finished his note and closed the chart.

"The Presidential Suite—my, my. On the twelfth floor, yes? You'll just *have* to come up and visit me—I'm on thirteen. Once I get out of here, of course." Her hand quivered into the air again. She frowned. "By the way, when do you think I'll be able to leave? Last time I was here, you remember when I got pneumonia?, the nurse told me—"

"Only a couple of days, we hope. I'll be back in tomorrow, just to visit. Dr. Homewood will be taking care of you, like we agreed. Okay?"

"All right, doctor. You just go on and enjoy yourself. Don't worry about me."

Standing in the hallway, Plato felt like a truant escaping a lecture at the principal's office. Maybe visiting Mrs. Andreas in the hospital wasn't so bad after all. Better than spending half their vacation in her corner room on the thirteenth floor, eating prune brownies and searching for cracks in her monologues.

Cal was no longer in the waiting area, of course. Plato knew exactly where to find her. He took the elevator down to the sub-basement, navigated a

maze of garish yellow corridors, pointed out the cafeteria to a whitehaired man with muddled eyes who looked like he'd been lost for a decade in the labyrinthine hallways, and finally arrived at a pair of battleship gray swinging doors marked "Authorized Personnel Only."

As he raised his hand to knock, the door swung open. His wife stood behind it, rolling a white coverall into a ball and tossing it into the trash. She turned, strode through the door, and collided with him.

"What the—" She backed a step, gave a start of recognition. "Oh."

"Yeah. Oh." He leaned on the door, grinned like a cat with a mouse between its paws. "What did you think—you could sneak down here and I wouldn't know about it?"

"They—ummm—they were having a little trouble, so they called me up." She put her hands in the pockets of her jeans and shrugged, gave that little toss of her head like she sometimes did in court, that little toss that seemed to say, "Okay, just *try* to prove otherwise."

"So how did they know you were here?"

"Dr. Marley?" The pathology resident entered the office from the autopsy suite. With splash goggles, a mask, and a hooded

white coverall, he looked like an astronaut returning from the moon. "I just wanted to say thanks. That was a great pickup you made, about the urticaria. I would never have noticed it. Thank goodness you just popped up like you did; I really appreciate it."

As he walked away, Plato said, "Just 'popped up,' huh?"

Cal deftly changed the subject. She sat down at the battered steel desk. "I've got some interesting news for you."

"Don't tell me—let me guess. That guy was murdered."

"I'm not saying—"

"Pushed off the balcony. Lemme think a minute. Cause of death: blow to the skull from that ladder. Mechanism of death: massive intracerebral contusion and hemorrhage. Manner of death: homicide. See? I could be a forensic pathologist, too."

"Wrong. He wasn't pushed off the balcony. At least, I don't think so." Still wearing her blood-spattered Keds Hi-tops, Cal trotted to the doorway and waved to the pathology resident. "Hey, Mike—leave that, okay? I want to show something to my husband."

In the autopsy suite the body still lay atop one wing of the L-shaped steel table, but most of the organs were scattered across the other wing like

pieces of a car at a chop shop. Cal slipped her wedding ring into the pocket of her blue terry pullover and donned a pair of rubber gloves. She hefted a glistening gray object from a scale and showed it to her husband. "Take a look at this lung. Overdistended, but it weighs less than you might expect."

She walked to the table and placed it beside its mate. The other lung had been sectioned widthwise, showing much of the bronchial tree. The bronchi were swollen in much of the upper lobe, and many of the smaller tubes were blocked. "Saccular bronchiectasis and mucus plugging. I'd guess he's had asthma for a long time."

"And that's what killed him?" Plato sounded dubious. "Then how did he end up in our swimming pool?"

"That's what we wondered, too. Until I noticed the urticaria."

She walked over to the victim's head. "By the way—Plato, meet Webster Crandall, late co-chairman of Crandall Chemicals."

"How do you do," Plato muttered. He looked down at the man's flat, clean-shaven cheeks, high forehead, matted graying hair and mustache. Those pale yellow eyes still bulged as they had when he'd pulled Crandall from the wa-

ter. He'd seen eyes like that once before, when he'd pithed a frog in medical school. The light had gone out of them; they held only blank amazement, shock at his utter helplessness, his sudden demise.

"The pathology resident was ready to call it status asthmaticus when I came in," Cal said. "But he wondered why the lungs didn't show more drastic signs of asthma." She pointed at Crandall's face and neck, the backs of his arms. The hives were small but definitely noticeable. "I spotted these and decided we'd better take a closer look. Of course, he'd have gotten to it eventually. You can't miss it."

Cal separated the skin at the front of the neck and gestured with a probe. The voicebox had been sectioned, along with the trachea leading to the empty chest. "Marked angioedema. The larynx and trachea are swollen nearly shut." She opened the mouth and pointed to the back, at the small flap of tissue that covers the windpipe during swallowing. "The epiglottis is swollen to nearly twice its normal size. His entire windpipe is shut down, from the larger bronchi all the way up to his mouth. I've never seen anything like it."

"So what happened?"

Cal shook her head. "I honestly don't know. It appears to be a sudden, severe episode of allergic shock—anaphylaxis. But the findings are pretty much limited to the respiratory system—there's none of the vascular congestion I'd expect to see. And I've never seen such severe airway obstruction."

"Huh. Interesting." Plato glanced down at his watch. "Gee, look at the time. And we've got dinner reservations for seven tonight. Just enough time for a shower—"

Cal snapped her gloves into the red hazardous-waste can and followed him into the office again. "I'll meet you back at the hotel, okay? Mike's going to drive me to the police station after I type up this report."

"Type?"

"It's a new edict from old Doc Morrow—the Tecumseh County Coroner." Cal snagged a fresh sheet of paper and rolled it into the battered Underwood. She raised her index finger, the only one that knew how to type. "All autopsy reports—" *plink!* "—on suspected homicides—" *plonk!* "—must be typed with a fresh ribbon—" *plunk!* "—and turned in to the investigator's office within twenty-four hours." *Ploink!*

Plato sighed. "How about if I move the reservations back to nine o'clock?"



"You're a dear." She smiled sweetly at him as he turned to leave.

"Is the rack of lamb to your liking, sir?"

"Yes, Henri. It's very good." Plato stabbed a tiny redskin potato and forked it into his mouth. He was on a first-name basis with the waiter, having arrived at nine o'clock, waited half an hour, ordered the slowest item on the menu, and given up on his wife's making an appearance before the Joie de Vivre closed. He could tell that Henri felt sorry for him. He didn't mind the pity, though. It was better than eating alone.

"Some complain of too much rosemary," Henri said tentatively. He hovered at Plato's elbow, resplendent in a black cummerbund, high-collared white shirt, and perfectly creased black trousers. His small mouth had a perpetual pucker, as though he'd just swallowed his tongue.

"Not me. It's wonderful."

Across the room, a man signaled for his check. Henri sighed. "If you will excuse me."  
"Certainly."

Just then, Cal appeared in the doorway. She was dressed for Paris in a black taffeta gown with a plunging neckline, sheer lacy sleeves, and black

seamed stockings. Her blonde hair was pulled away from her face and tucked up to reveal the pearl and gold earrings Plato had given her last Christmas. Cal's hair always lightened to blonde at the height of summer, then faded to sandy brown with the falling leaves. Until this past autumn, when some of the hair faded to gray—medicine does that to you. Now it was permanently blonde.

But she didn't look like a doctor tonight. Even wearing heels, her walk was graceful and effortless; she looked more like a model gliding down a runway.

Heads turned.

Plato had a speech already prepared. Something about "consideration," "mutual respect," "thoughtfulness." Words she'd fired across his bows more than once in the past. Finally he was in the right. Indisputably. There was no room for argument. He opened his mouth to speak, fixed her sandy brown irises with a steely gaze, and felt his anger running to slag. "Have some lamb. It's very good."

"Thanks." She dug in with a ferocity that was all out of proportion to her size. During the meal, she carefully avoided any mention of her evening's activities. Their conversation was limited to speculation on the

Browns' chances next season, the heavy snowfall that was forecast for that evening, the skiing they'd planned for the next afternoon.

Altogether, it was a marvelous performance. By dessert, though, her eyes were glinting feverishly, the way they had when she had asked Plato to marry her, or told him about Rosenkrantz's confession. After asking for the check, he finally decided to be merciful.

"So," Plato asked, "did you get your report typed up?"

"Sure did." She spooned the last bit of triple chocolate cheesecake into her mouth, patted the little bulge in her dress. "Only took an hour. A whole page."

"That's got to be about five words a minute. If you ever get tired of pathology . . ."

"Took it to the station downtown and had a little chat with Jeremy Ames."

"What for?" Plato asked innocently. "I thought he was with homicide."

"He is. But I remembered where I had seen autopsy findings like Crandall's before. In a kid—just nine years old, poor thing. Way back in residency in Chicago." She sat back, closed her eyes and remembered. "He had a horrible allergy to bees. Some of the kids in school didn't believe it, decided to play

a trick on him. A bee got trapped inside one of the gym lockers. His friends threw him in and locked the door. When they opened it, he was dead."

"From one bee?" Plato was horrified. Dinners with Cal sometimes disagreed with his digestion. Maybe he should have eaten alone after all.

"Hymenoptera sensitivity can be very dramatic."

"So what's all this got to do with Crandall? Even in the posh Seneca Windsor Hotel, I'm sure the bees get frozen out by the middle of winter."

"We'll see." Cal shrugged mysteriously. "Crandall didn't have any sting marks. But he did have a private physician—physician's assistant, actually. Jeremy Ames is going to talk to him tonight, get a basic medical history. I told him what to look for."

"Huh." Plato hoped it turned out to be nothing. Cal always wanted deaths to be rational, explainable. To have some big mystery behind them that she could eventually solve. Like her mother's suicide—

She grabbed his hand. "We're closing the place. Come on, let's go."

"Your chariot awaits, my dear." He glanced at his watch. "I think it's too late to go dancing."

Cal glanced down at her stomach. "Just as well. I'd feel like I was carrying a bowling ball around with me."

Outside, the frozen Chevette huddled like a bunny caught out of its burrow. After waiting ten minutes for the engine to warm up and start defrosting the windshield, Plato piloted the little skateboard down the ice-glazed streets of Seneca. During the ride, Cal was quiet, pensive. Or maybe just too cold to talk.

Nothing like a romantic winter holiday.

It was much warmer in the hotel suite. The fake fireplace in the living area glowed toasty, the island-sized bed in the room beyond had been turned down, and a bottle of champagne was chilling on the nightstand beside a huge basket of fruit.

Plato washed up, uncorked the champagne, and switched off the lights. With the drapes pulled and the sheets left closed, it might have been almost any city. The giant green bottle cap atop the Bearing City Beer Company billboard might have been the roof of the new AT&T building in downtown Chicago. The blinking lights on WQXQ's antennae could be flashing from the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. But the enor-

mous pair of red roller skates perched on the roof of United Caster and Roller's main foundry were Seneca's hallmark. They were actually featured on postcards in the lobby downstairs.

Cal emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, wearing the satin and lace chemise he'd bought for her on their first anniversary. Plato hadn't seen it more than twice in the two years since. He handed her a glass of champagne and led her over to the loveseat facing the wide windows.

"Mmmm, nice." She sipped the champagne, snuggled up close to him. Her voice was warm and silky. "Maybe Eddy didn't have such a bad idea after all, huh?"

"Maybe we should do this more often." He felt her breath on his shoulder, the soft fall of her hair like eiderdown against his arm. "Like every week."

He reached for her, and it was like those dreams he used to have. Where the beautiful girl just dissolved into unreality beneath his touch. Only this time, it wasn't the alarm clock. It was the telephone.

"I'll get it," Cal sighed. She slipped away from his embrace and walked over to the side of the bed.

"Cal Marley." It was her coroner's voice—competent, self-assured, always in control. "Yeah. Hi, Jeremy."

Plato groaned. He heard the clink of the champagne glass on the nightstand, the soft click of the tiny bedside light being switched on, the abrasive clack of her pen girding itself for action.

Scratch, scratch. "Yeah. Relso—that's the physician's assistant, right? Did he notice any of them missing? Okay, let me get this straight. Crandall had a big-time bee allergy, was getting desensitization shots with venom. That's according to Relso. Now, when was the last time he got one? Okay, we should be able to check against the date on the prescription, see if any were missing."

Plato leaned over, let his head sink into the fluffy pillow resting against the arm of the couch. His back was a little tired.

"How was it delivered?" Scratch, scratch. Cal's pen was surprisingly loud. Especially if he closed his eyes, he could try to imagine exactly what she was writing. "Through the nebulizer, of course. Yeah, that little air-pump machine. He was getting medicine for his asthma that way; it would be simple to slip some bee venom

into the medicine chamber. Did you save that for testing?"

Really, it was much more comfortable if Plato put his feet up too. Maybe just a little nap; he'd wake up as soon as she hung up the phone.

"Yeah, send it up to Cleveland. Tell them to check it for hymenoptera. H-Y-M-E-N-O-P-T-E-R-A. Uh-huh. Yeah, I'll be glad to talk to her tomorrow morning. Eight o'clock? See you then."

The last thing Plato remembered was the pair of giant red roller skates. There was a girl in them, impossibly beautiful, impossibly huge. She was bearing down on him; he'd be crushed. He cried out, but she didn't notice him, didn't look down at all.

Cal grabbed her watch and switched off the tiny alarm before it woke her husband. She glanced over at him, still curled up in a ball on his half-acre of the bed. She had dragged his semiconscious body across the room last night, wrestled the covers over him, then slipped out of her scratchy lace chemise and into bed. Instinctively, he had reached out in his sleep and dragged her over, cuddling her close like a boy hugging a teddy bear.

Most of the bed was still unrumped; they were accustomed to sleeping together on a single twin bed they'd inherited from Plato's Aunt Thelma. Crammed into a corner of their tiny bedroom like a stowaway berth on a steamship.

He still hadn't wakened when Cal finished getting showered and dressed. So she kissed his nose and left a note on the nightstand.

She didn't have far to go. Detective Jeremy Ames was waiting in the lobby restaurant, sipping a cup of coffee. He rushed to his feet when he saw her, nearly knocking over a cane chair in his haste to show proper respect for a lady.

He was old-style military, his twenty years in the Marines marked by a permanent crew-cut and straightbacked posture. Lean and wiry, he was nearly as tall as Plato and twice as strong. He worked sixty hours a week, volunteered at the Boys' Club, and coached football at one of the high schools. He'd been divorced three times but didn't pay any alimony. His wives still loved him.

"Would you like some coffee, Cal?" Ames's voice was always a surprise. More like a priest's than a cop's, filled with fatherly concern. He interrogated criminals in just the same way.

"No, thanks. I had some tea up in my room." They had a wall unit in the bathroom; hot orange pekoe had brewed while she showered. She could get accustomed to this lifestyle very quickly.

On the ride up the glass elevator, Ames faced the door and tightly gripped the waist-high brass rail. He hated heights. Natalie Crandall's room was on the thirteenth floor, just as Matteo had guessed yesterday afternoon. Walking down the corridor, they passed a table stacked high with plants, flower arrangements, and an enormous "Get Well Soon" card. Plato had said Mrs. Andreas also lived on thirteen; Cal guessed that this was her room.

Ames stopped at the next door down the hall. To their surprise, Mark Relso answered their knock. The young physician's assistant had dark circles under his pale blue eyes. He wore a short white coat, the kind medical students wore at Seneca General. A night's growth of pale stubble shadowed his wide jaw and high cheekbones. "Please come in. Mrs. Crandall is lying down."

Walking past him, Cal realized she had never before seen a handsome man with red hair. At least, not in person.

The room was laid out much like their own suite on the floor below. The widow Crandall strode in from the bedroom, wearing jeans and an oversized knit sweatshirt slung low to reveal a smooth suntanned shoulder. Her face was made up flawlessly, and her hair was a perfect auburn shade that couldn't be found in a bottle. Webster Crandall had been forty-one; Cal guessed his widow was in her mid-thirties.

"Mrs. Crandall, I'm Detective Ames and this is Dr. Marley," Ames began. "As I said earlier, we'd like to ask you a few questions about your husband's death."

"Ask away." She gestured at a sofa, perched in a wing chair with her feet tucked under her. Ames glanced meaningfully at Relso, and she waved a hand at the physician's assistant. "Mark, dear, would you mind going downstairs for a moment?"

Natalie Crandall waited for the door to close, then turned to her visitors. Behind her, the sliding door connecting the room with the balcony was open. Cal heard occasional shouts and splashes from the pool far below, like distant voices echoing down a tunnel.

"As I told you on the telephone, Mrs. Crandall," the de-

TECTIVE began, "we have reason to believe your husband—"

"Was murdered," she interrupted him. "Of course, I think the whole thing's silly, and I telephoned Deputy Police Chief Roberts. He was a personal friend of Webster's, and he told me that this was just a formality, because of who my husband was."

"Perhaps a bit more than a formality; we'll know more about that this afternoon." Ames smiled genially and pulled a notebook from his pocket. "I'd like to make this as quick and easy for you as possible, Mrs. Crandall. Could you tell me about your activities yesterday afternoon, from about twelve o'clock on?"

She sighed, glanced up at the ceiling. "It's quite simple, really. I had lunch with an old friend of mine, Sylvia Ferguson. Sylvia and I kept in touch long after Webster's firm went national and we moved to Chicago. Of course, her husband is senior vice president of United Caster and Roller."

"Of course."

"After lunch—let's see, around one o'clock—I came back to our room and got dressed for a swim. Webster was here. Sitting out on the balcony and—" The widow's breath caught. She covered her mouth with her hand, swal-

lowed twice. "I'm sorry. I just realized that . . . that was the last time I saw him."

Natalie closed her eyes, bit her knuckle, and sobbed silently. A tear slid down into the flawless makeup of her cheek. Ames grabbed a box of tissue and handed it to her while Cal wondered at the sudden display of emotion. When they had entered, Natalie Crandall had seemed inappropriately nonchalant, almost boisterous. She wondered if the woman's tears were more for display than the result of genuine grief.

Cal waited for the tears to subside. "How did your husband seem then? Was he having trouble with his breathing?"

"Yes, of course." She shifted her bleary gaze to Cal, dabbed an eye, and blew her nose. "For the last year or so, Webster's asthma had been getting worse. Even in the winter, when most of his allergies should have subsided, he'd been on almost constant nebulizer treatments. He was short of breath just sitting in his chair yesterday. We tried to get him to go to the hospital, but he hated them."

Ames frowned at his notebook. "Did you return to your room after swimming, Mrs. Crandall?"

"No—I took my sweatsuit down to the pool with me. Mark tells me that I get a much better aerobic workout if I swim before working with the weights." Her thin eyebrows came together. "I was in the exercise room when Rolf came and told me—about Webster."

"Rolf Edmundson—your husband's partner?"

"Yes. He told me that Webster had had an attack. He didn't tell me about the fall. I didn't know he was dead until Mark came and told me."

The remainder of Natalie's statement agreed with Relso's comments from the night before. The physician's assistant had been in and out of Crandall's room most of the afternoon, following his employer's progress and mixing doses for the nebulizer. But he had been down in the lobby when the executive had fallen to his death. Apparently he had just mixed another dose for Crandall and was planning to return to the room once his patient finished the breathing treatment. Crandall preferred to be alone during the fifteen minutes it took for the air pump to empty the medicine chamber into his lungs; he said it helped him relax.

Ames rose to his feet. "Thank you very much for your time, Mrs. Crandall. We're all deeply



sorry about your husband's death, and I hope we don't have to bother you again."

"Thank you." The widow sniffled into another tissue as she showed them the door.

"Thank goodness you're here, Dr. Marley." The nurse hurried up to Plato as he stepped off the elevator. Her thin mouth quivered anxiously. "We got her calmed down, but after the police came and questioned her—"

"Police?" Plato was bewildered. "What did the police want with Mrs. Andreas?"

The brisk clacking of the nurse's heels stopped suddenly. "Didn't anyone tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"About Mrs. Andreas. Someone tried to—" She glanced around, lowered her voice, and gestured him closer. "Someone tried to *kill* her. Held a pillow over her face. She reached the call button just in time. I guess that scared him and he ran off."

Plato whirled and rushed down the hall. One of the hospital's security guards stood outside the door. He recognized Plato and nodded him inside. Mrs. Andreas was propped in a chair beside the window, gazing into space, watching snowflakes swirl down onto the roof of an adjacent wing. She swiv-

eled her head slowly away from the window.

"Why?" she asked him. "Why would anyone want to kill me? Eighty-seven years old last month, praise God, and never has anyone raised a finger to hurt me, aside from the Germans, but they don't count. I asked that man out there—yes, that one looking in the door just now—I asked him if he was German, and he told me no, but he wouldn't tell me if he was, yes? Naturally, the doctor was German, that is all I can think, to want to strangle an innocent woman, mother of two children who raised them with not two pennies to rub together sometimes—wait, wait—"

Plato didn't wait. "Which doctor?"

"The one who tried to kill me, of course." She poked a bony finger toward the pillow on the bed. "I was lying there, right on that pillow. Yes, right there. And no, I didn't see his face, I told those policemen again and again, he was holding a pillow up in front of himself—I thought he was a janitor, changing the linens. But I saw his hands, smooth hands like a baby's, and his short white coat, and then he held it up over my face before I could scream, and I couldn't breathe or scream; I reached out and hit



the nurse's call rope with my arm—"

Her breaths were coming in short, quick gasps. Plato recognized the symptoms; Mrs. Andreas's panic attacks had come almost hourly until he got them under control with medication and counseling. Her arms and hands were shaking. He held her wrists, gripped them tightly. Her eyes darted about the room, searching for an escape.

"Now, Mrs. Andreas. You've had a terrible fright, and I don't blame you for feeling the way you do. I'd be scared, too." She was looking at him now, and her breaths were deeper, steadier. "Eddy will be here tonight, and there'll be someone watching you all the time. I'll talk to the nurse, and we'll get someone to stay with you here around the clock, all right?"

The old woman nodded her head shakily. Plato would talk to Eddy, and a private duty nurse would be sitting beside Mrs. Andreas's bed throughout the night. Money wasn't an issue. He helped her back into bed, headed out to the nurses' station, retrieved her chart, and ordered a sedative. While he was standing there, the nurse looked up from the desk.

"Nobody saw a thing," she murmured. "He disappeared without a trace. If it weren't for

the extra pillow, we might have thought she'd imagined it all."

Riding back down in the elevator again, Plato realized he would have believed the story—even if the pillow had disappeared, too.

Late that afternoon, Plato wished he had prescribed some tranquilizers for himself as well. He stood beside Cal atop the North Bowl at Boston Mills Ski Resort, looking down at the broad black sweep of the Cuyahoga River, the snow-covered, tree-stubbed hills flanking it on either side, the nearly vertical, mogul-studded drop that stretched between the tips of his skis and the safety of the haybales.

"Plato," his wife chided. "Stop shivering. At any of the bigger ski resorts, this would be considered an intermediate hill at most. It's not even a three hundred foot vertical drop."

"That's the problem," he replied. "It's all *vertical*." Besides, he thought, if you fall from three hundred feet, you're just as dead as if you fall from fifteen hundred feet. Before he could pass on this bit of wisdom to his wife, she was gone. A spray of snow and ice, a blur of pink was all that marked her passage down the slope. There! he saw her optic orange hat flit

between two mounds of snow. Most of the time, she was simply invisible. But once, near the bottom, she popped out and sailed through the air, spread-eagled, then tucked into a neat landing and glided to a half-turn skid at the haybales.

She waved up at him, a friendly pink ant at the bottom of the slope.

It really wasn't so bad, once he got into the swing of things. The trick was knowing precisely when to lie down. He'd wrestle to the top of a mogul, pant for air in the thin atmosphere, then skid and slither down to a stop in the yawning crevice beyond. But halfway down the hill, after his left arm was nearly sliced off by a bounding, howling six-year-old with *no poles*, he finally rose to his knees and stood. His skis shot ahead, carrying him back and forth, slicing through the crevices at breakneck speed. Left, right, left, and then a wall of snow loomed before his face; he leaned ahead instinctively, dug low, and heard nothing but his heartbeat as he bounced into the air and flew.

He even spread his arms and skis for a moment, not so much showing off as trying to shed velocity by acting like a human parachute. It didn't work. His skis sprang away as he slammed into the last mogul,

digging a man-shaped crater with his arms, legs, torso, and mouth.

Riding back on the chairlift, Plato had trouble talking, so Cal filled him in on her conversation with Natalie Crandall. "The case is stacking up against Relso. I heard about Mrs. Andreas—she insists that her assailant was wearing a short white coat. Relso trained at Seneca General, he knew his way around, and he would have blended in with his white coat. He had no reason to expect to be identified; Mrs. Andreas wasn't supposed to live."

"What's his alibi?" Actually, it came out more like, "Huh hih-hadivie?" The snow in Plato's beard had melted, then turned to ice. There was mogul gravel in his mouth. His tongue would thaw by spring, he hoped.

"Relso and Natalie say they were together this morning, when Mrs. Andreas was attacked." The lifthouse and wooden exit ramp were approaching. Cal shifted her skis into position, slipped the thongs from her poles back onto her wrists. "A bellboy brought their breakfast, around seven A.M. But Relso still would have had plenty of time to get to the hospital after that."

"Why would Relso try to kill Mrs. Andreas?" Plato asked as he and Cal bumped down the

wooden runners. Near the end of the ramp, he stopped and leaned on his poles. The North Bowl lay to the right; a left turn would take him to Tiger. Almost as tall, almost as steep—but without moguls, it wasn't nearly so life-threatening. "And why would Natalie Crandall lie about it?"

"Probably because of something Mrs. Andreas saw. Natalie Crandall and Relso arrived Thursday night, and Webster flew in the next morning—yesterday. When the police questioned Mrs. Andreas, they showed her pictures. She said she saw Natalie slipping out of Relso's room very early yesterday morning—just before Webster arrived. Apparently, Natalie was only wearing a nightgown, and a skimpy one at that. Their rooms were adjacent, I guess she didn't plan on running into anybody."

"And Relso didn't want the police to know he had a motive for killing Webster."

"Right. Natalie Crandall's having a lawyer flown in tonight. I think Relso'll need one very soon." Cal shifted her ski tips toward the North Bowl. "You going to stay up here all night?"

"What about the test for hymenoptera?" Plato asked.

"The medicine chamber of the nebulizer was positive; we

found out this afternoon." She moved closer. "You're stalling, aren't you?"

"Oh, I just thought I'd—" Plato began shuffling his skis to the left, to safety. "Uh, well—"

The pink phantom grabbed his elbow, dragged his weight to the right. "Let's go. You did great last time. Just a couple more runs, and we'll head back home for dinner."

As he followed his wife down Mount Doom, Plato reflected on his wedding. He and Cal had written the vows themselves. Wasn't there something in there about death?

"So where's the little mis-sus?" Only Rolf Edmundson's head was visible, a dumpling bobbing in the swirling, bubbling kettle of the whirlpool. To Plato, who stood adjusting his goggles at the shallow end of the lap pool, Edmundson seemed to have deflated. He had trouble reconciling the tiny head bobbing in the water with the fleshy mountain that had yanked him away from Crandall's body yesterday afternoon.

"Upstairs. We went skiing today, and she got kind of tired out."

"Not surprising, dainty little thing like that." Edmundson's hand swam back and forth in

the bubbles. He and Plato were the atrium's only occupants. It was almost eleven o'clock; the pool would close soon. Overhead, steel girders meshed in a gray web against the black backdrop of the skylights.

Plato chuckled along with his companion. Maybe he could put the sudden camaraderie to some use. "Too bad about your partner."

"Eh? Oh yes. Yes indeed." He glanced over at Plato, tiny black eyes sizing him up. "Your woman's the coroner, right? Then you both had best steer clear of Natalie for a while."

"Why's that?"

Edmundson mopped his face with a damp towel. Sweat was beading on the top of his pink head, and his cheeks flamed brightly. "I guess they arrested Relso tonight. I'm not surprised. I've wondered about him and Natalie. I even tried to warn Webster about it once, but he wouldn't listen."

"Relso and Natalie Crandall?"

The dumpling rested his head against the edge of the whirlpool and closed his eyes. "You didn't hear it from me."

Plato shrugged, turned, and began his laps. The pool wasn't really big enough for a good freestyle rhythm, so he stuck to breast stroke and butterfly. But his goggles kept slipping. He

stopped at the shallow edge again, and Edmundson continued the conversation as though there hadn't been a gap.

"Always loyal to his friends, that's how Webster Crandall was," Edmundson pronounced through the steam. "I was bucking for tenure down at Ohio State when I met him. I had a tightwad department chair, made me account for every broken piece of Pyrex, every drop of acetone. Web talked me into starting the business with him. Now look at me."

Plato wasn't looking at him. He was looking at Angelina Rosetti, who shared the thirteenth floor room with Mrs. Andreas. Angelina had the same stooped posture as her sister. And like her, she walked with a quad cane, wore a patterned babushka across her humped shoulders. They both had trouble sleeping. Eddy said they did laps around the atrium late at night, when all the other guests were asleep. He called them his Windsor watchdogs.

Angelina wandered over to the concierge's desk. A red-coated bellhop rushed up with a tall glass of milk on a tray.

Edmundson was still talking. "Amazing thing—bee venom in his nebulizer. Of course, he was dreadfully allergic. Terrible way to go, terrible. I hope Relso gets the chair."

Plato stepped up the ladder and towed himself off. "Excuse me. I think the pool's about to close."

"Not until midnight—they've changed the hours." He gave a sly grin and chuckled. "'Course, that's quite a dish you've got waiting in your room. I don't blame you for wanting to get to bed early."

Obviously, Edmundson wasn't the salesman of the partnership. Plato padded over to the elevator and waited for Glinda's glass bubble to float down from the heavens. Just as he was stepping inside, Edmundson appeared.

"Going up?" he panted. His voice had that hamsterlike squeal again. His face was drained of color, and his knees wobbled as he stepped onto the car.

"Yes." They were on the ground floor already. Plato pushed twelve and watched his companion reach for thirteen. His hand was shaking; he pushed number fourteen first. "Are you all right?"

Edmundson glanced over at him. Sweat trickled down his forehead and gathered at his dimpled chin. "Yes—yes. It's the whirlpool. It's quite a workout."

Plato prayed that he never reached that level of physical fitness. He stepped out on the

twelfth floor, paced down to his room, and opened the door. Cal lay on the bed, a book propped open on her knees, the reading light glowing softly from the nightstand. Plato tiptoed toward the foot of the bed, peered at the cover of the book. Maybe it was something romantic.

It was Eckert and James's *Interpretation of Bloodstain Evidence at Crime Scenes*. He hadn't seen her pack it in the suitcase, but he doubted she had picked it up on the newsstand downstairs.

"I had a little talk with Rolf Edmundson," he called from the bathroom as he slipped out of his suit. He towed himself dry. "He seemed pretty sure that Relso was having an affair with Natalie Crandall."

He tiptoed back to the bed, dropped the towel, and got between the sheets. Her satin nightdress slid smoothly against his skin. He kissed her shoulder. "I guess you were right about them, Callie."

"Mmfrmf?"

He looked up at her face. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was open. A positive "O" sign, as they used to say on rounds during his internship. Actually—yes, the tip of her tongue protruded just slightly from the corner of her mouth. More of a "Q" sign, then.

With a sigh, he lifted the tome from her knees, tucked the blanket up to her chin, and reached over to switch off the light. She shifted onto her side, and he spooned up against her back. Gently, fraternally, he draped his arm over her and snugged her close.

"I was hoping I'd find you here." Detective Jeremy Ames plished through the water at the edge of the pool toward the table where Cal was slicing a grapefruit. "I called your room, but there wasn't any answer."

"Plato's still upstairs sleeping," she explained with a grin. "Probably dead to the world. I took him skiing yesterday."

"Never been, myself," Ames grunted. "I was a navy brat—not too many ski slopes near the ports."

"You're never too old to learn." She gestured for him to sit down, wondering why he had come. The morning's *Seneca Daily Press* reported that Relso had been arrested for Webster Crandall's murder, as well as the attempt on Mrs. Andreas's life.

"I just thought I'd stop by to thank you," Ames said in his soft voice. He glanced over at the pool. "I know this is your vacation, and that was a great pickup you made, about the bee venom and all."

"No big deal." She knew that Ames usually complimented people before asking for favors. The detective was usually euphoric once a case was wrapped up with a suspect in custody. But today he seemed wilted. Maybe it was just the heat from the pool. "One of the other guys would have caught it, I'm sure."

"Maybe," he conceded. Then, as though it had just occurred to him, he asked, "Say, I was wondering—would you mind answering one more question for me?"

"Shoot." Cal coated the grapefruit with sugar, spooned a slice into her mouth.

"Well, they checked the prescription for Crandall's desensitization shots against the number of vials he had left—it all checks out okay. There aren't any vials missing." He frowned. "Natalie Crandall's lawyer is representing Relso. He's already making a big deal out of it."

While Ames was talking, the widow appeared in the atrium, wearing a high-cut red tank-suit. She dropped her exercise bag on a chaise and walked toward the pool. Cal shifted to the side, trying to hide behind the potted palm shading her table. She lowered her voice. "Relso could have done it any number of ways, I guess. He might have

refilled the prescription a day early, but you could check up on that. Or he might have forgotten to give a dose one day. Probably the safest method would be giving Webster a shot of plain saline one day and stashing the extra ampoule."

"Neat. Untraceable." The detective made a mark in his notebook. "I'll check with Crandall's pharmacy back in Chicago, just in case he refilled it early."

Natalie Crandall was drunk. She came toward them with the slow, deliberate stride of a tightrope walker. Carefully she bobbed to a stop beside the table, teetering slightly, tracing slow circles in the air with the top of her head. "Listen."

Ames glanced up at her with the polite, patronizing smile cops use on harmless drunks. "Good morning, Mrs. Crandall."

"Listen. Mark dear wouldn't—Mark Relso dear—Mark Relso wouldn't hurt a fly—he wouldn't know how." The circles in the air grew larger; she grabbed the glass tabletop for support. "Not like that bastard husband of mine—told him if he hit me again, I'd kill him. But I didn't, did I?"

Plato had appeared sometime during Natalie's performance. Cal saw him through the corner of her eye, felt the

table shift as her husband sat down beside her.

"Listen. I just wanted you to know that. I want everyone to know that." Suddenly, she started laughing. Her cackles were loud and harsh, like the clacking of bicycle spokes against a baseball card. "Funny thing—Crandall Chemicals killed umpteen bazillion bees with their damn pesticides. Looks like the bees finally got their revenge. What the hell're you grinning at?"

The widow was glaring at Plato. Cal glanced over at her husband, who was indeed beaming happily, very nearly chortling to himself. She elbowed him, and the smirk disappeared.

Rolf Edmundson had been breakfasting alone in the open-ended restaurant across the atrium. He must have heard Natalie's tirade; he hurried across the wet tile in his three-piece suit, still mopping his mouth with a linen napkin. "Natalie, hon, I think it would be best if you—"

"Mr. Edmundson!" Plato was beaming again. The plump executive wrinkled his forehead at him. "I'm glad you're here."

"Why's that? I hope you're not going to break—"

"Not at all," Plato reassured him. "Besides, what you told me was common knowledge.



But something Mrs. Crandall just said happened to make all the pieces slip into place."

Ames grunted, rolled his eyes at Cal. She shrugged helplessly. At times, Plato imagined himself a detective. He was wrong.

"I just had a little talk with Mrs. Rosetti—the woman we saw last night on our way to the elevators." He turned to the others. "I should give you all the background, I guess. Late last night, Angelina Rosetti was roaming the lobby, like she does most nights. She has trouble sleeping. Edmundson didn't see her, not at first. But when he caught up with me at the elevators, he looked like he'd seen a ghost. Of course, Angelina Rosetti is the sister of Mrs. Andreas—the woman who was almost murdered yesterday at Seneca General. They look very much alike, don't they?"

He was talking to Edmundson. The executive shrugged, muttered something, but didn't walk away. He dropped his plump hand from Natalie's arm.

"The first thing that tipped me off was something Edmundson told Natalie Crandall right after her husband had been loaded into the ambulance." Plato glanced up at him. "You

said Webster had suffered an asthma attack, right?"

"Yes. It seemed the logical thing. I saw no reason to—"

"Logical? After watching a man drop thirteen stories to his death, most people wouldn't be thinking about asthma."

"Webster's condition was very serious . . ."

"Angelina was quite helpful. She had been sitting on the balcony Friday afternoon when Webster Crandall was having his breathing treatment. He even asked her if the nebulizer was too noisy."

"Somebody's head's going to roll," Ames growled. "She should have been questioned."

"She *was* questioned—but not until after the attempt on her sister's life," Plato explained. "When Mrs. Andreas went into the hospital Friday afternoon—shortly after Webster's death—Angelina decided to visit relatives. She didn't like staying in the hotel room alone. And by the time the police reached her, she was too frightened to tell the truth."

"Go on." The detective measured Edmundson with his gaze.

"That afternoon, she saw Crandall switch off the nebulizer and step inside for a minute. Then the man she saw last night in the lobby—Rolf Edmundson—came out onto the



balcony. Alone. Angelina's telephone rang, so she didn't stay on her balcony. But back inside her room, she heard water running in Crandall's bathroom. Edmundson would have had plenty of time to—"

"To what?" The new chairman of Crandall Chemicals was turning pink. The flush started at his ears and spread across the top of his head and down his face. "Where would I have gotten bee venom, for Chrissake? This is crazy."

"That's what didn't make sense," Plato agreed. "Until Natalie Crandall reminded us about her husband's company. Crandall Chemicals makes pesticides. To develop the best pesticides, you have to have insects. Mosquitos, ants, wasps, hornets. And bees. You said your background was research, right?"

"This is preposterous." Edmundson tried to sneer but couldn't carry it off.

"I think you'll find that he has plenty of access to bees, even in winter," Plato told Ames. "If you check the records, you'll probably find that he spent some significant time alone in one of the research labs recently. That's pretty unusual for the co-chairman of a corporation."

"Then why the attempt on Mrs. Andreas?" Ames asked.

"From a distance, the two sisters look almost identical. Edmundson never saw them together, so he probably thought there was only one woman in that room. Once Crandall's murder was revealed, he knew what he had to do. There was a pile of cards and flowers outside their door yesterday; he probably got Mrs. Andreas's name and hospital room number from those. She never saw his face, but she got a good look at his hands. She said they were smooth, like a baby's. Can we see your hands, Mr. Edmundson?"

Mr. Edmundson was trotting away. Ames rushed to his feet. As the detective collected his suspect, Plato turned to Cal. "They'll probably want to search his room. I imagine a man of his proportions carries a white coat when he travels. Saves embarrassment when he walks into a lab."

Cal gazed open-mouthed at her husband.

"What?" he asked, shrugging casually.

"I'm kind of shocked, I guess." A rim of white surrounded her sandy brown irises. If Webster Crandall had stepped out of the pool and sat down at their table, she wouldn't have looked more surprised. "I'd have never—I mean *really*, I never imagined—"

"Yes?"

"I guess you're a lot brighter than I thought."

Plato sighed. "You're so romantic."

That night, after polishing off a deep-dish Chicago style pizza and half a bottle of wine, Plato drowsed on the loveseat in their room. The lights of Seneca twinkled dimly through another heavy squall. Six inches of snow had fallen already; it looked like the roads would be too treacherous for another trip to Boston Mills tomorrow.

Too bad.

Behind him, Cal was changing clothes and talking about the case. "Crandall's assistant said the research branch of the company had been short of funds lately. Crandall investigated and found that Edmundson had been skimming. It was very hush-hush, but he threatened to expose his partner unless Edmundson sold his share of the company. For a slightly lower-than-market price."

Plato's head lolled over to the pillow. The couch was surprisingly comfortable. He lifted his feet and rested them on the arm of the sofa.

"They've got a pretty solid case against him," she continued. The pop of a cork, a merry fizzing and glugging percolated

through Plato's consciousness. "One of the maintenance men at the hospital saw a photo of Edmundson," remembered seeing him in the stairwell near the geriatrics floor at about the right time. He's not very easy to forget."

Quick, light footsteps, like those of a small animal, pattered over to the couch. "Plato?"

Cal sighed audibly. "Poor thing." She leaned over to kiss his cheek. One arm under his neck, the other wrestling with his shoulder, she sat him up again. He slumped forward. Cal stood and leaned back, dragging his hands with her until he stood.

Plato opened his eyes suddenly, pulled her close. "Fooled you."

"Aaak!" she gasped, shivering like a caught fish in his arms. "Watch me laugh. Tee-hee-hee. I could've thrown my back out."

"Sorry." He stroked her neck, nuzzled her shoulders, felt the tension draining away. He bowed slightly. "Dr. Marley, may I have the pleasure of this dance?"

"Certainly." She sketched a curtsy in her oversized Chicago Bears nightshirt.

Barefooted, they waltzed to the slow remembered rhythm of waves on a sandy shore,

whirling around coffee tables and nightstands, across an ocean of thick pile carpeting, to

an island of their very own.

Nothing like a romantic winter holiday.

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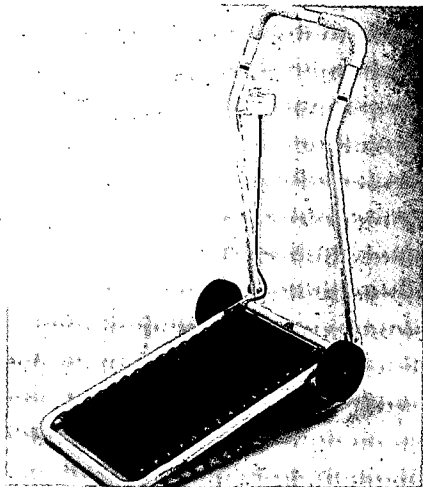
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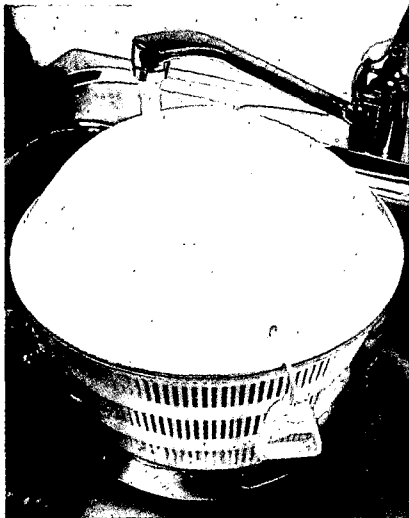


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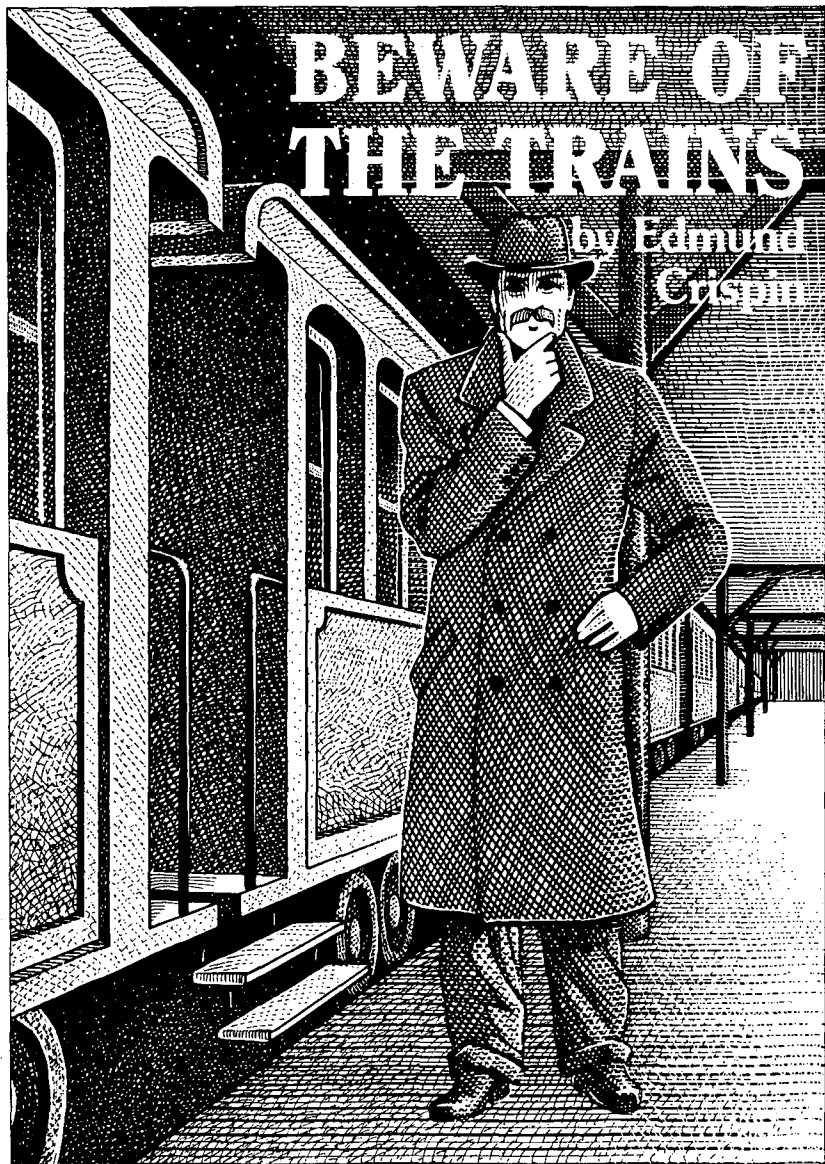
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MYSTERY CLASSIC

# BEWARE OF THE TRAINS

by Edmund  
Crispin



*Illustration by Steve Chalker*

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A whistle blew—and with the swift, unobtrusive deference of an expert lackey the electric train moved out of Borleston Junction, past the blurred radiance of the tall lamps in the marshaling yard, past the diminishing constellations of the town's domestic lighting, and so out into the eight mile wedge of darkness which lay between Borleston and Clough. At Borleston there had been the usual substantial exodus, and the few remaining passengers—whom chance had left oddly and, as it turned out, significantly distributed—were able at long last to stretch their legs, to transfer hats, newspapers, and other impedimenta from their laps to the vacated seats beside them, and for the first time since leaving Victoria to relax and be completely comfortable. Mostly they were somnolent at the approach of midnight, but between Borleston and Clough none of them actually slept. Fate had a conjuring trick in preparation, and they were needed as witnesses to it.

The station at Clough was not large, nor prepossessing, nor, it appeared, much frequented; but in spite of this, the train, once having stopped there, evinced an unexpected reluctance to move on. The whistle's first confident blast having failed to shift it, there ensued a moment's offended silence: then more whistling, and when that also failed, a peremptory, unintelligible shouting. The train remained inanimate, however. And presently Gervase Fen, professor of English language and literature in the University of Oxford, lowered the window of his compartment and put his head out, curious to know what was amiss.

Rain was falling indecisively. It tattooed in weak, petulant spasms against the station roof, and the wind on which it rode had a cutting edge. Wan bulbs shone impartially on slot machines, timetables, a shuttered newspaper kiosk; on governmental threat and commercial entreaty; on peeling green paint and rust-stained iron. And near the clock a small group of men stood engrossed in peevish altercation. Fen eyed them with disapproval for a moment and then spoke.

"Broken down?" he inquired unpleasantly. They swiveled round to stare at him. "Lost the driver?" he asked.

This second query was instantly effective. They hastened up to him in a bunch, and one of them—a massive, wall-eyed man who appeared to be the station master—said: "For God's sake, sir, you 'aven't seen 'im, 'ave you?"

"Seen whom?" Fen demanded mistrustfully.

"The motorman, sir. The driver."

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"No, of course I haven't," said Fen. "What's happened to him?"

"'E's gorn, sir. 'Ooked it, some'ow or other. 'E's not in 'is cabin, nor we can't find 'im anywhere on the station, neither."

"Then he has absconded," said Fen, "with valuables of some description, or with some other motorman's wife."

The station master shook his head—less, it appeared, by way of contesting this hypothesis than as an indication of his general perplexity—and stared helplessly up and down the deserted platform. "It's a rum go, sir," he said, "and that's a fact."

"Well, there's one good thing about it, Mr. Maycock," said the younger of the two porters who were with him. "'E can't 'ave got clear of the station, not without being seen."

The station master took some time to assimilate this, and even when he had succeeded in doing so did not seem much enlightened by it. "'Ow d'you make that out, Wally?" he inquired.

"Well, after all, Mr. Maycock, the place is surrounded, isn't it?"

"Surrounded, Wally?" Mr. Maycock reiterated feebly. "What d'you mean, surrounded?"

Wally gaped at him. "Lord, Mr. Maycock, didn't you know? I thought you'd 'a' met the inspector when you came back from your supper."

"Inspector, Wally?" Mr. Maycock could scarcely have been more bewildered if his underling had announced the presence of a Snab or a Greevey. "What inspector?"

"Scotland Yard chap," said Wally importantly. "And 'alf a dozen men with 'im. They're after a burglar they thought'd be on this train."

Mr. Maycock, clearly dazed by this melodramatic intelligence, took refuge from his confusion behind a hastily contrived breastwork of outraged dignity. "And why," he demanded in awful tones, "was I not *hinformed* of this 'ere?"

"You 'ave bin informed," snapped the second porter, who was very old indeed, and who appeared to be temperamentally subject to that vehement, unfocused rage which one associates with men who are trying to give up smoking. "You 'ave bin informed. We've just informed yer."

Mr. Maycock ignored this. "If you would be so kind," he said in a lofty manner, "it would be 'elpful for me to know at what time these persons of 'oom you are speaking put in an appearance 'ere."

"About twenty to twelve, it'd be," said Wally sulkily. "Ten minutes before this lot was due in."



"And it wouldn't 'ave occurred to you, would it—" here Mr. Maycock bent slightly at the knees, as though the weight of his sarcasm was altogether too much for his large frame to support comfortably—"to 'ave a dekko in my room and see if I were 'ere? *Ho* no. I'm only the station master, that's all I am."

"Well, I'm very sorry, Mr. Maycock," said Wally, in a tone of voice which effectively canceled the apology out, "but I wasn't to know you was back, was I? I told the inspector you was still at your supper in the village."

At this explanation Mr. Maycock, choosing to overlook the decided resentment with which it had been delivered, became magnanimous. "Ah well, there's no great 'arm done, I dare say," he pronounced; and the dignity of his office having by now been adequately paraded, he relapsed to the level of common humanity again. "Burglar, eh? Was 'e on the train? Did they get 'im?"

Wally shook his head. "Not them. False alarm, most likely. They're still 'angin' about, though." He jerked a grimy thumb towards the exit barrier. "That's the inspector, there."

Hitherto, no one had been visible in the direction indicated. But now there appeared, beyond the barrier, a round, benign, clean-shaven face surmounted by a grey homburg hat, at which Fen bawled, "Humbleby!" in immediate recognition. And the person thus addressed, having delivered the injunction "Don't *move* from here, Millican" to someone in the gloom of the ticket hall behind him, came onto the platform and in another moment had joined them.

"My dear Professor Fen," he said, "this *is* a pleasure. . . . And you, sir—" he turned to Mr. Maycock—"will be the station master."

"Ah," said Mr. Maycock affirmatively. "I've 'eard why you're 'ere, inspector. These lads of mine 'ave just told me."

"Yes," said Detective-Inspector Humbleby with native affability. "You were away when I arrived, so I took the liberty—"

"*That* I wasn't, sir," Mr. Maycock interrupted, anxious to vindicate himself. "I was in me office all the time, only these lads didn't think to look there. . . . 'Ullo, Mr. Foster." This last greeting was directed to the harassed guard, who had clearly been searching for the missing motorman. "Any luck?"

"Not a sign of 'im," said the guard sombrely. "Nothing like this 'ere 'as ever 'appened on one of *my* trains before."

"It is 'Inkson, isn't it?"

The guard shook his head. "No. Phil Bailey."

"Bailey?"

"Ah. Bailey sometimes took over from 'Inkson on this run." Here the guard glanced uneasily at Fen and Humbleby. "It's irregular, o' course, but it don't do no 'arm as I can see. Bailey's 'ome's at Bramber, at the end o' this line, and 'e'd 'ave to catch this train any'ow to get to it, so 'e took over sometimes when 'Inkson wanted to stop in Town. . . . And now this 'as to 'appen. There'll be trouble, you mark my words." Evidently the unfortunate guard expected to be visited with a substantial share of it.

"Well, I can't 'old out no longer," said Mr. Maycock. "I'll 'ave to ring 'eadquarters straight away." He departed in order to do this, and Humbleby, who had only the vaguest idea of what was going on, required the others to enlighten him. When they had done this: "One thing's certain," he said, "and that is that your motorman hasn't left the station. My men are all round it, and they had orders to detain anyone who tried to get past them."

At this stage an elderly businessman, who was sharing the same compartment with Fen and with a dotty-looking girl of the sort commonly found in Food Offices, irritably inquired if Fen proposed keeping the compartment window open all night. And Fen, acting on this hint, closed the window and got out onto the platform.

"Nonetheless," he said to Humbleby, "it'll be as well to interview your people and confirm that Bailey *hasn't* left. I'll go the rounds with you, and you can tell me about your burglar."

They left the guard and the two porters exchanging theories about Bailey's defection and walked along the platform. "Goggett is my burglar's name," said Humbleby. "Alfred Goggett. He's wanted for quite a series of jobs, but for the last few months he's been lying low, and we haven't been able to put our hand on him. Earlier this evening, however, he was spotted in Soho by a plain-clothes man named, incongruously enough, Diggett. . . ."

"Really, Humbleby . . ."

"... And Diggett chased him to Victoria. Well, you know what Victoria's like. It's rather a rambling terminus, and apt to be full of people. Anyway, Diggett lost his man there. Now, about midday today one of our more reliable narks brought us the news that Goggett had a hideout here in Clough, so this afternoon Millican and I drove down here to look the place over. Of course the Yard rang up the police here when they heard Goggett had vanished at Victoria; and the police here got hold of me; and here we all are.

There was obviously a very good chance that Goggett would catch this train. Only unluckily he didn't."

"No one got off here?"

"No one got off or on. And I understand this is the last train of the day, so for the time being there's nothing more we can do. But sooner or later, of course, he'll turn up at his cottage here, and then we'll have him."

"And in the meantime," said Fen thoughtfully, "there's the lesser problem of Bailey."

"In the meantime there's that. Now, let's see."

It proved that the six damp but determined men whom Humbleby had culled from the local constabulary had been so placed about the station precincts as to make it impossible for even a mouse to have left without their observing it; and not even a mouse, they stoutly asserted, had done so. Humbleby told them to stay where they were until further orders, and returned with Fen to the down platform.

"No loophole there," he pronounced. "And it's an easy station to—um—invest. If it had been a great sprawling place like Borleston, now, I could have put a hundred men round it, and Goggett might still have got clear. . . . Of course, it's quite possible that Borleston's where he did leave the train."

"But in spite of you and your men," said Fen, "this motorman must at least have been able to leave his cabin unobserved." They were passing the cabin as he spoke, and he stopped to peer at its vacant interior. "As you see, there's no way through from it into the remainder of the train."

Humbleby considered the disposition of his forces, and having done so: "Yes," he admitted, "he could have left the cabin without being seen; and for that matter, got to shelter somewhere in the station buildings."

"Weren't the porters on the platform when the train came in?"

"No, I don't think they were. We'd better make sure of it, though."

It transpired that the porters, having been enjoined by Humbleby to keep out of the way, had retired, immediately after the arrival of the police, to the porters' room; and that it was not until at least half a minute after the train had stopped that Wally had ventured out onto the platform in pursuance of his duties. As for Maycock, he had remained in his office until the guard had haled him forth to take part in the search for Bailey.

"Well, Bailey's got to be on the station somewhere," said Humbleby, "so we'll have another look—a systematic one, this time."

Systematic or not, it turned out to be singularly barren of results. It established one thing only, and that was that beyond any shadow of doubt the missing motorman was not anywhere in, on, or under the station, nor anywhere in, on, or under his abandoned train.

And, unfortunately, it was also established that he could not, in the nature of things, be anywhere else.

Fen took no part in this investigation, having already foreseen its inevitable issue. Instead he retired to the ticket office, and there telephoned the station master at Borleston, representing himself, to that official's great alarm, to be Sir Eustace Missenden. With the aid of this gratuitous imposture, he elicited the information that Bailey, and no one but Bailey, had been driving the train when it left Borleston. The station master's personal testimony as to that fact could be, and was, independently corroborated by two porters. Moreover, the train had not, Fen remembered, either stopped or slowed down at any time between Borleston and Clough.

When Humbleby appeared to him, twenty minutes later, he was dozing by the ticket office fire; and Humbleby was not at all mollified by his news.

"The thing's impossible," he said glumly. "Nothing short of impossible. I can't imagine what to do next."

"Not impossible," said Fen through a yawn. "Rather a simple device, really. . . ." Then more soberly: "But I'm afraid that what we have to deal with is something much more serious than a mere vanishing. In fact—"

The telephone rang, and after a moment's hesitation Humbleby answered it. The call was for him; and when, several minutes later, he put the receiver back on its hook, his face was grave.

"They've found a dead man," he said, "three miles along the line towards Borleston. He's got a knife in his back and has obviously been thrown out of a train. From their description of the face and clothes, it's quite certainly Goggett. And equally certain, *that*—" he nodded towards the platform "—is the train he fell out of. Well, my first and most important job is to interview the passengers. And anyone who was alone in a compartment will have a lot of explaining to do."

Most of the passengers had by now disembarked, and were standing about in various stages of bewilderment, annoyance, and futile inquiry. At Humbleby's command, and along with the guard, the

porters, and Mr. Maycock, they shuffled, feebly protesting, into the waiting room. And there, with Fen as an interested onlooker, a Grand Inquisition was set in motion.

Its results were both baffling and remarkable. Apart from the motorman, there had been nine people on the train when it left Borlestone and when it arrived at Clough; and each of them had two others to attest to the fact that during the whole crucial period he (or she) had behaved as innocently as a newborn infant. With Fen there had been the elderly businessman and the dotty girl; in another compartment there had likewise been three people, none of them connected with either of the others by blood, acquaintance, or avocation; and even the guard had witnesses to his harmlessness, since from Victoria onwards he had been accompanied in the van by two melancholy men in cloth caps, whose mode of travel was explained by their being in unremitting personal charge of several doped-looking whippets. None of these nine, until the first search for Bailey was set on foot, had seen or heard anything amiss. None of them (since the train was not a corridor train) had had any opportunity of moving out of sight of his or her two companions. None of them had slept. And unless some unknown, traveling in one of the many empty compartments, had disappeared in the same fashion as Bailey—a supposition which Humbleby was by no means prepared to entertain—it seemed evident that Goggett must have launched himself into eternity unaided.

It was at about this point in the proceedings that Humbleby's self-possession began to wear thin, and his questions to become merely repetitive; and Fen, perceiving this, slipped out alone onto the platform. When he returned ten minutes later, he was carrying a battered suitcase; and regardless of Humbleby, who seemed to be making some sort of speech, he carried this impressively to the center table and put it down there.

"In this suitcase," he announced pleasantly as Humbleby's flow of words petered out, "we shall find, I think, the motorman's uniform belonging to the luckless Bailey." He undid the catches. "And in addition, no doubt—*stop him, Humbleby!*"

The scuffle that followed was brief and inglorious. Its protagonist, tackled around the knees by Humbleby, fell, struck his head against the fender, and lay still, the blood welling from a cut above his left eye.

"Yes, that's the culprit," said Fen. "And it will take a better lawyer than there is alive to save *him* from a rope's end."

\*

Later, as Humbleby drove him to his destination through the December night, he said: "Yes, it had to be Maycock. And Goggett and Bailey had, of course, to be one and the same person. But what about motive?"

Humbleby shrugged. "Obviously, the money in that case of Goggett's. There's a lot of it, you know. It's a pretty clear case of thieves falling out. We've known for a long time that Goggett had an accomplice, and it's now certain that that accomplice was Maycock. Whereabouts in his office did you find the suitcase?"

"Stuffed behind some lockers—not a very good hiding-place, I'm afraid. Well, well, it can't be said to have been a specially difficult problem. Since Bailey wasn't on the station, and hadn't left it, it was clear he'd never entered it. But *someone* had driven the train in—and who could it have been *but* Maycock? The two porters were accounted for—by you; so were the guard and the passengers—by one another; and there just wasn't anyone else.

"And then, of course, the finding of Goggett's body clinched it. He hadn't been thrown out of either of the occupied compartments, or the guard's van; he hadn't been thrown out of any of the *unoccupied* compartments, for the simple reason that there was nobody to throw him. *Therefore*, he was thrown out of the motorman's cabin. And since, as I've demonstrated, Maycock was unquestionably *in* the motorman's cabin, it was scarcely conceivable that Maycock had not done the throwing.

"Plainly Maycock rode or drove into Borleston while he was supposed to be having his supper, and boarded the train—that is, the motorman's cabin—there. He kept hidden till the train was under way, and then took over from Goggett-Bailey while Goggett-Bailey changed into the civilian clothes he had with him. By the way, I take it that Maycock, to account for his presence, spun some fictional (as far as he knew) tale about the police being on Goggett-Bailey's track, and that the change was Goggett-Bailey's idea; I mean, that he had some notion of its assisting his escape at the end of the line."

Humbleby nodded. "That's it, approximately. I'll send you a copy of Maycock's confession as soon as I can get one made. It seems he wedged the safety handle which operates these trains, knifed Goggett-Bailey and chucked him out, and then drove the train into Clough and there simply disappeared, with the case, into his office.

It must have given him a nasty turn to hear the station was surrounded."

"It did," said Fen. "If your people hadn't been there, it would have looked, of course, as if Bailey had just walked off into the night. But chance was against Maycock all along. Your siege, and the queer grouping of the passengers, and the cloth-capped men in the van—they were all part of an accidental conspiracy—if you can talk of such a thing—to defeat him; all part of a sort of fortuitous conjuring trick." He yawned prodigiously and gazed out of the car window. "Do you know, I believe it's the dawn. Next time I want to arrive anywhere, I shall travel by bus."

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# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**S**tuart Woods has combined Tinseltown and New Mexico for glamor, stirred in several larger-than-life characters, and added a drop-dead premise just to spice things up. The result is a deliciously stylish thriller titled **Santa Fe Rules** (HarperCollins, \$5.99) that should please fans of the best of the made-for-TV suspense movies. The book opens when successful Hollywood producer Wolf Willett, out of town on business, opens the paper to read of the gory murders back home of his wife, his business partner—and himself. It's a time-honored scenario, that of an innocent protagonist trying to avoid both his would-be killer and the police, who think *he's* the killer, à la *The Fugitive*. Woods adds a fascinating attorney named Ed Eagle (and therein lies a tale, too) and the blooming of romance for both men and turns the formulaic into an entertaining diversion.

China Bayles is the proprietor and herbalist-in-residence of Thyme and Seasons, a small shop she's opened in the tiny town of Pecan Springs, Texas. That's what China decided she wanted to do after years of a lucrative, burn-out career as a big-city attorney. And although Pecan Springs might not be a chic metropolis, they've welcomed China; they've even accepted her friend Ruby Wilcox, who runs a New Age store adjoining China's. But Pecan Springs is definitely not ready for witchcraft, especially when the Reverend Billy Lee Harbuck marshals his grassroots militia into action to protest Ruby's tarot class. And China is most definitely not ready for a visit from her alcoholic mother, especially since it's obvious the woman has a few secrets she's dying to share. "Dying," however, is what happens next in **Witches' Bane** (Scribners, \$20),



and it's up to China to see that her new home isn't rent asunder by a witch hunt. Strong women characters, lots of herbal lore, and snappy dialogue are just several of the delights in the *Witches' Bane* brew.

Kate Charles's second "Book of Psalms" mystery is **The Snares of Death** (Mysterious Press, \$18.95), and she reprises protagonist David Middleton-Brown, his artist friend Lucy, and several of the gang from her excellent first tale, *A Drink of Deadly Wine*. The setting is again centered around the Anglican church; this time it's the tiny parish of St. Mary the Virgin, a very traditional Anglo-Catholic church. But the new reformist pastor definitely has an agenda that regards no one's feelings. He's a bully to his family and a fanatic with his parishoners. His intolerance for the views of others has angered the ragtag members of an animal rights' group, and he obviously has ambitions to make changes in the Anglican church that will reach far beyond his parish. It's no surprise when he's murdered, but David is shocked when a young priest of his acquaintance is charged with the crime. Charles's mysteries are a treat for Anglophiles, a rich concoction of church lore, village life, and a fair-play puzzle. Fans of Elizabeth George will love Kate Charles.

I'll always consider Gregory Mcdonald's Fletch mysteries in a class by themselves for sheer entertainment value. And although Mcdonald had sworn that Fletch had investigated his final case, he's surprised us with **Son of Fletch** (Putnam, \$19.95), and I'm delighted. Fletch has given up his globe-trotting journalist days and retired to a quiet farm in Tennessee with a sassy Southerner named Carrie. Quiet, that is, until the rainy night when a young guy shows up at his door claiming to be his son. Jack asks for asylum, of sorts. Fletch still isn't convinced he's anyone's father, but the kid and his two companions undoubtedly match the description of three newly escaped convicts. And thereby hangs the tale. If you've never spent time with the ever-resourceful and irrepressibly wisecracking Fletch, here's your chance. If you're already familiar with Gregory Mcdonald's character, I need only tell you Fletch is back!

"Ellery Queen" wrote, as well as starred in, an extremely popular series of books by two cousins. The recent reissue of **The Siamese Twin Mystery** (Otto Penzler Books, \$6.95) gives readers a chance to see why Queen ranks as one of the foremost Golden Age writers. Ellery and his top-cop father, Inspector Richard Queen, are driving home from a vacation when a forest fire forces them up a lonely

road. The road dead-ends at a huge mountaintop home, where the surgeon who owns it offers them food and shelter until they can go on their way. Here are all the elements of a classic puzzler: a disparate group of men and women, a number of secrets closely held, eccentric clues as keys to the puzzle, a big lonely house cut off from the world. Queen turns up the burner (quite literally) by using the forest fire, which grows more deadly with each twist of the case. The final scenes are heart-stopping, the language is so-o-o civilized, and Ellery Queen is an easygoing hero. It's fun to see this back in print.

Edward Marston is the author of an Elizabethan mystery series set around an acting company. Now he's launched "The Domesday Books" series with **The Wolves of Savernake** (St. Martin's, \$19.95). The setting is England in 1086, a mere twenty years after the conquest of the Anglo-Saxons by the Normans under William the Conqueror. Gervase Bret is a young lawyer in William's court, a gentle soul who at one time studied for the priesthood. His job is to head one of the tribunals that travels around England compiling tax information (which will become the Domesday Book). His companion is a rough and ready Norman soldier, Ralph Delchard. They have come to the town of Bedwyn to interrogate the abbey regarding its lands. But they've also walked into a hornets' nest of local land brawls, abbey politics, anti-Norman sentiments, and a town terrified by a killer wolf—or is the killer human? Readers who like their mystery with history should find this as enjoyable as Marston's Nicholas Bracewell theatrical tales.

**Quaker Witness** by Irene Allen (Villard Books, \$18) brings back Elizabeth Elliot, a widow who serves as clerk at the Quaker Meetinghouse in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Shortly after she befriends science graduate student Janet Stevens, the girl becomes a suspect in the death of her faculty advisor. Elizabeth is generally known for her patience, intelligence, and quiet domestic life, but she's sure that Janet has been falsely accused and that gets her Yankee dander up. Allen explores the areas of academia—the sexual harassment of female students, the intense rivalry for publication and tenure, the poverty of the grad students who do all the work, and the blindness of the administration—that could lead someone to murder, and all through the eyes of a quiet and sensible woman of strong character.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



A common theme in mystery movies is whether we can trust even those closest to us. Most of the time, as a film unspools, we find that we can't.

In **Deception**, the road to that answer is something of a cinematic travelogue in which an American housewife becomes a globetrotting gumshoe determined to find out the truth behind her husband's apparent demise.

Bessie Faro (Andie McDowell) is a widowed young Los Angeles mother whose handsome husband owned an airplane salvage company. A plane crash in Mexico leaves her man burned beyond recognition, something that should set off red lights and clanging bells for those who watch these types of movies. When Johnny Faro's front teeth arrive in a package from the Veracruz cor-

oner's office, Bessie leaves her young children behind and hops on the first bus headed south of the border.

After the funeral, Bessie pokes around her husband's dilapidated office on the edge of town. There she finds a short stack of baseball cards hidden under a desk.

The statistics on the backs of the cards offer some sort of code, which our intrepid widow is able to translate and turn into account numbers for various banks around the world. This is what propels her on her international search.

During her travels, which take her from Central America to the Caribbean, to Berlin, Athens, and finally to Cairo, Bessie meets up with a missionary-like doctor (Liam Neeson) whose mission is to feed the world. Somehow his charity organization is mixed up in

Johnny Faro's financial shenanigans. But he seems clueless as to what's going on.

Neeson, as Dr. Fergus Lamb, does bring some much-needed Gary Cooper-like charm to this film, despite a silly and shallow rôle that does little to further the story line.

Although Andie McDowell gets top billing for this picture, it's really the scenery that stars. The Mexico we see is down to earth and folksy. The Berlin we are exposed to has a corruptible, Cold War quality to it, and the dusty Cairo that the baseball cards lead us to is teeming with people, ancient culture, and, thankfully, mystery.

But even the exotic locations are not used to full advantage. When McDowell and Neeson reach the top of one of Egypt's great pyramids as the sun rises over Cairo, it's pretty. But if the pair had been chased up the pyramid by someone who didn't want the truth found out, it could have been heart-stopping instead.

After all, Gary Grant and Eva Marie Saint didn't just waltz their way across Mount Rushmore, did they?

McDowell has a thankless job. There is simply not enough interaction with other characters. Her husband (Viggo Mor-

tensen) is absent when the movie begins, so there's not much chance for exploring their relationship. Until well into the movie, we only know Johnny as a one-dimensional flashback.

Even then, there's no indication that he's anything more than an all-American, loving husband. There's nothing to indicate he's capable of wrongdoing.

The truth is that despite this film's good looks—McDowell's, Neeson's, and the scenery—*Deception* is neither intriguing nor very original.

We only have to go back a couple of years to find the similarly named film, *Deceived*, in which Goldie Hawn played the pretty, young wife who's dumbfounded to find her husband isn't the man she thought she married. That film at least had some heart-thumping moments. But the newer *Deception* lacks suspense and an element of surprise.

Because of the baseball motif, which is perhaps the one constant throughout the film, fans of the national pastime might get a kick out of watching. But for others, director Graeme Clifford and screenplay writers Robert Dillon and Michael Thomas have struck out.

# THE STORY THAT WON



The December Mysterious by Jacques E. Bouchard of Honorable mentions go to Virginia; John Podulka of Dower of Pittsfield, Massachusetts; S. T. Susan L. Walkup of Flagstaff, Arizona; Lesa Neace of Whitesburg, Kentucky; and Barbara Fay Mitchell of Orleans, Massachusetts.

Photograph contest was won Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Daniel LeBoeuf of Burke; Glen Ellyn, Illinois; Suzanne chusetts; Victor P. Dufault of Miller of Tucson, Arizona;

Inge Morath/Magnum

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## LAST CALL by Jacques E. Bouchard

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The heat was oppressive, the air thick as molasses. Three weeks of the same, and today it looked like it might finally break into one hell of a downpour. Up ahead the traffic showed no sign of moving. Jake looked at his watch. Two twenty-five! The old man had been adamant: two thirty on the dot, and no more deliveries after today. "Crazy old fool," he cursed under his breath.

In the back seat the llama protested weakly, still under the effects of the tranquilizer. Jake had been careless last night: he thought a zoo employee might have seen him load the animal into his car. But the old man paid plenty. Enough to take the risk, and enough not to ask questions. So what if the old fruitcake wanted to expand his pet collection?

Two thirty-two. The old man had never stuck around later than needed; there was no reason he would now. Jake cursed some more and punched the steering wheel. He could always leave the llama on the zookeeper's doorstep, ring the bell, and run away. The line of cars crept two feet forward and stopped again. Damn that old coot and his sons and their ugly wives! He read the note the old man had given him: "Noah Zark, 555-4634." Crazy old fool; he thought, and threw it out the window.

A fat raindrop plopped heavily on his windshield.

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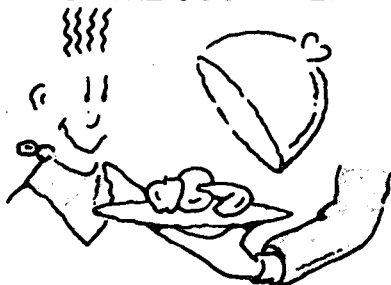
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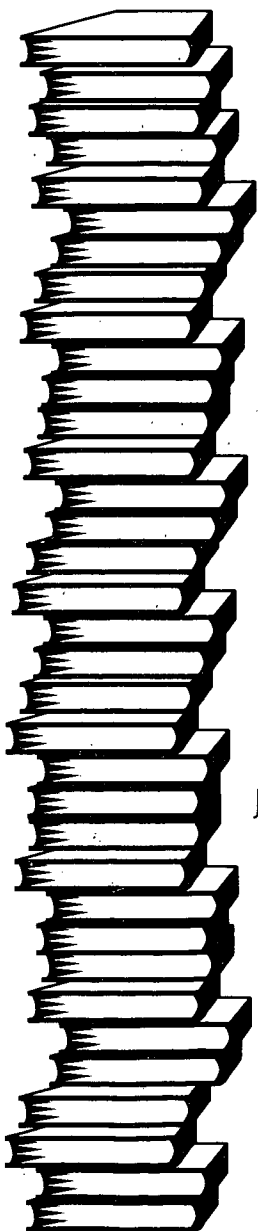
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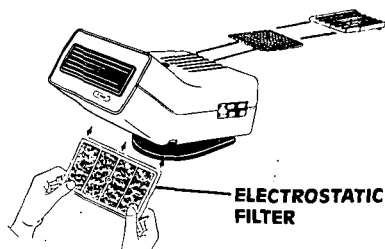
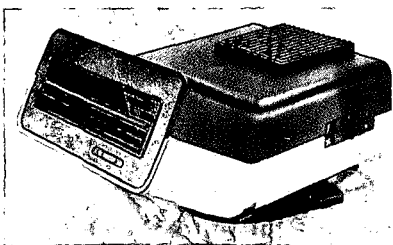
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